*The Geomancer*
Originally created and written by Fulgur
Illustrated by Crosschan
Reimagined by Yu May and Ojota

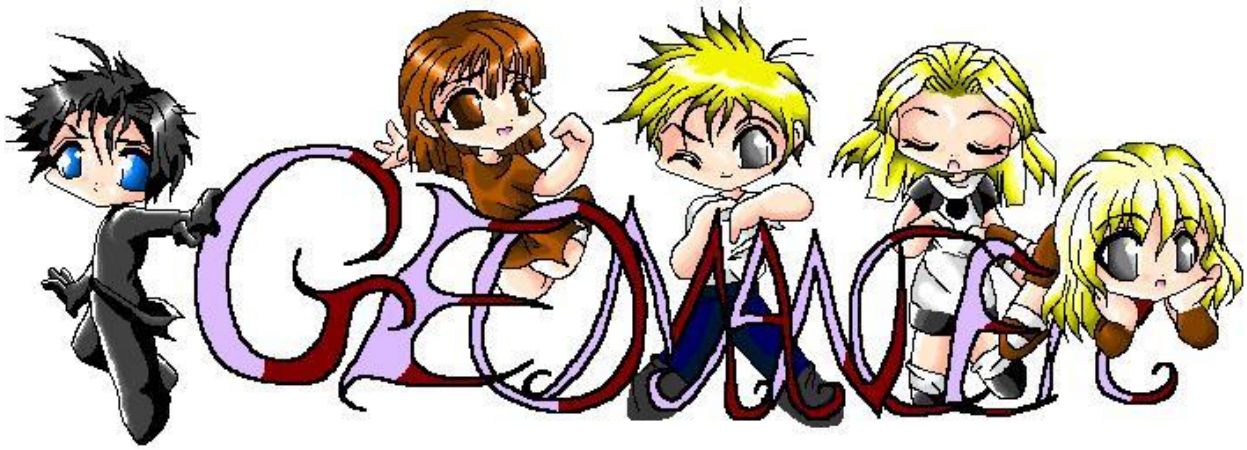
Note from the Editors:
On March 25, 2004, Fulgur wrote and posted the first chapter of *Geomancer* online. It is notable for being one of the earliest, complete spanking-centric fantasy novels ever posted on the internet. Both the editors were early fans of *Geomancer*, and Ojota even commissioned Yu May to write a fan fiction spanking story set in Fulgur's world. While discussing concepts for this short story, Ojota and Yu May also agreed that the original novel was in need of some editorial polishing, and with Fulgur's blessing, they decided to begin work on an edited edition.

*The Geomancer* is an attempt to update and revise Fulgur's original story, staying true to the core themes and ideas, while also adding new material where it seemed fitting. In addition to minor changes to grammar, punctuation, and spelling, the editors also wanted to flesh out the story and world in a way that respected the author's vision.

The author gave permission to attempt this project, and was consulted throughout the process. In keeping with the author's wishes, we have kept the original illustrations for *Geomancer*, drawn by artist Crosschan. We also kept the unedited bonus commentary sections, "May's Reader's Corner," in the appendix. We felt presenting the main chapters together resulted in a cleaner narrative flow, but the Reader's Corner posts provide significant insight into Fulgur's creative process and artistic intentions. The original version of *Geomancer* has been archived on asstr.org.

*Geomancer* is set in a world where both spanking and other forms of corporal punishment are viewed as a common-place, culturally-acceptable practice. It contains frequent disciplinary spanking scenes, including the depiction of corporal punishment being used on minors, and references to wives being spanked by their husbands and adult daughters being spanked by their fathers, usually with consent. Some scenes also depict judicial corporal punishment, and there are brief depictions of torture, but these scenes are placed in the context of a narrative of good vs. evil. This story shouldn't be seen as an endorsement of the actions depicted.

Geomancer is a story with frequent spanking scenes. However, *Geomancer* is also not *primarily* a spanking story. In the words of the author, "The spankings don't drive the story, they ride along with it." We hope you will enjoy experiencing this world as much as we did.




Prologue: The Natural Order of Things

For as long as I could remember, Dad's sheathed sword and shield had hung on prominent display in the kitchen, right behind the head of the table where he usually sat.

The shield was decorated with the coat of arms of the City of Cant, which depicted a man in chainmail holding a sword aloft with his right hand, while cradling a finely-dressed woman close to his chest. Despite the simple drawing style, there was no mistaking one key detail: the woman's ornate skirts were pinned up in the back, and her chemise had been unbuttoned to reveal her bare bottom in the shape of an upside down heart, painted bright red, right at the center of the shield. It was the famous hero and heroine of Cant's traditional courtly ballad: *The Knight and the Lady*. It also happened to be my favorite story.

I remembered one time, I must have been about nine or ten, when Mom had caught me gazing at Dad's sword and shield displayed on the wall, and sighed. "One day, Zack, you will be responsible for taking care of a young woman, and to spank her when she needs it. And when that day comes, do try to pay attention to more than just her bottom."

May had peered at me with a sly smile. Back then, six-year-old May had been acting especially bratty, to the point that Dad in desperation had finally carved her first spanking paddle. "He was looking at the lady's butt! Aren't you going to spank him?"

Mom had shaken her head. "Of course not. It's only natural for a boy to take an interest in… good workmanship. Besides, Zack is nearly at the age where he'll be too old for a spanking."

May had let her mouth hang open. "Huh? How old is too old for a spanking?"

Mom had hummed. "Probably about eleven or twelve, for a boy. Definitely not after age thirteen. That's when a boy becomes a man."

May had rubbed her hands together, her eyes full of mischief. "So that means, when I turn thirteen, I'll be too old for a spanking anymore!"

Mom had shaken her head, and removed May's little spanking paddle from its hook on the wall. "Oh no, May, I'm afraid girls like us never quite outgrow the need for a good spanking. After you turn thirteen, you'll be too big for the little spanking paddle, but that just means we'll have to use something heavier—like a hairbrush, or a wooden spoon—to give you big girl spankings."

"Huh? But that's not fair! How come *I* get spankings if Zack doesn't?"

"It's perfectly fair. A boy learns his trade at thirteen—and how to care for himself. Even if he still chooses to live with us, Zack will be a man. But for girls, it takes many more years before we finish maturing. And as long as the man of the house is responsible for taking care of us, that means we women agree to submit to his authority. So what that means is, no matter how old a girl gets, she is never too old for a spanking, assuming she really deserves one."

May had pouted, her voice going shrill and whiny. "No fair! Girls shouldn't get spankings! I don't want more spankings!"

Mom had shaken a finger. "Stop that whining at once. If you don't want a spanking, try acting like a lady."

May had flopped off her chair, pummeling the floor with her fists and feet. "No! I don't *wanna'* be a lady! I wanna' be too big for a spanking! Waaah!"

Then, to my astonishment, Mom had hooked the little paddle into her sash, picked my little sister up off the floor, screeching and squealing, and carried her up the stairs to her bedroom. Even from the bottom of the stairs, I could clearly make out the tell-tale sounds of a spanking. It only took Mom three swats to snap May out of her performative temper tantrum, and for May to start crying for real. Then Mom paused the spanking for a few moments, presumably to lecture May. "Shame on you, young lady. You've just earned yourself a paddling on the bare."

"No! Please, Mommy, not on the bare!"

Then, the spanking started all over again, and from the sound of the slaps I was sure Mom was using May's little spanking paddle. Whenever Mom or Dad had to use the paddle, May usually got a number of strokes equal to her age, unless she was being especially bratty, in which case she got a few extras. Whatever the number, by the time it was through, May was bawling and blubbering like a little baby.

I dared to risk climbing the stairs, but was too scared to approach May's bedroom door. Then I overheard my mother cooing gently, and softly shushing May. "Shh… there, there, May. That was quite a spanking you got. I'm sorry I had to spank you, but you certainly deserved it for throwing that childish temper tantrum."

May hiccuped, then answered in a soft voice. "I'm sorry… I didn't… I don't want to be a baby…"

I heard a soft patting sound, and guessed that Mom was giving May a few love-taps across her bottom. “Then remember this moment later, the next time you feel like acting out.”

“B-but… am I gonna get spankings for forever and ever, Mommy, even when I’m an old lady?”

I heard the sound of rustling cloth. Mom must have pulled May into a hug. “Oh, I doubt that. You know I was spanked by my father until I was well into my teenage years, until the day I married your father. And even after that, your father still had to spank me from time to time, for the first few years of our marriage, at least.”

“Daddy… gives you spankings, Mommy? Just like he spanks us?”

“Well, not that much anymore. You see, I decided that if I ever wanted to be too old for a spanking, then I’d better start acting like it. But yes, if I ever need a good spanking, then I trust your father to give me one. But not like the little spankings you children get. You see, May, spanking is an act of love. And all women need to feel loved. I think that’s why we girls need to be spanked so much more than boys.”

“But… spankings… hurt?”

“And they’re supposed to! Whenever I get a spanking, I expect to get it right on my bare bottom, until it shines beet red, and I’m crying my eyes out. That’s how we learn to be better. Aren’t you already thinking how you’re going to be a good girl, and never throw tantrums ever again?”

At the mention of a spanking on the bare bottom, I was tempted to approach May’s door, and take a peep, but I held myself back. I’d overheard May get spanked plenty of times, but something told me that it wouldn’t be right.

I heard May hum thoughtfully. “Well, I suppose so, but… what if my husband is mean, and spanks me every single day, for no reason?”

I heard Mom giggle. “Ah, good question. There are lots of bad men in the world. So here’s a neat trick: never, ever let a man spank you, unless you’re absolutely sure you deserve a spanking, *and* you trust that he’s doing it for the right reason: because he loves you.”

“Like how Daddy loves us?”

“Exactly. A true knight never strikes a lady… unless she forgets to act like a lady. And even then, he’ll only smack her bottom.”

“Do you think I’ll find a knight like that one day?”

“If you look carefully, I’m sure you will. After all, every good man wants to be a knight.”

I shrunk back from the door, and crept downstairs. Once, Dad had told me that the days of knights in shining armor were coming to a close. After the end of the last war, there were almost no true knights left alive in the free cities. But as I looked up at the shield, I made my decision. One day, no matter what it took, I would be a knight.

# Chapter I: The Market Day

I woke up early.

The first light of sunrise peeked through my window, and the birds were singing.

Usually, I don't really notice things like birdsong, but this morning they were singing so loudly they woke me up.

Which was just as well, because it was a market day today.

With the summer harvest finished, my father and I would be traveling to the town of Ceris to sell any hay and grains we didn't need for our own livestock. But most of our profits came from my mother's prize vegetables. Ever since the end of the border war, the town markets had been growing steadily with each passing year. Now, the townsfolk of Ceris were rich, and the housewives of Ceris were willing to pay good silver for our wares.

Dad never talked about the war, no matter how many times I pestered him with questions about it. But once, when I was little, and had asked him urgently if he had once been a knight, he had explained that he was only a yeoman foot soldier, not a proper knight. A knight had to be able to afford his own horse and armor.

That had only puzzled me further. "But…we have Sandy?"

But Dad had snapped at me gruffly. "Sandy's too faithful a beast to let die in a bloody war, and anyway, she spooks too easy. Now, pipe down."

And that had been the end of my questions for the day.

Later, Mother had taken me aside to explain things in private. After he and Mom met, fell in love, and got married, Dad had been conscripted for the war on the border. Fortunately, he survived unscathed, and saved enough from his salary as a soldier to buy a small plot of farm land in a nameless village between Cant and Ceris.

Now, my father was a farmer, or as he liked to call himself, "An all-around man of the soil." The farmer's market in Ceris was the only means of making money we had, not that we needed much money.

"A garden, a good field, and a few good beasts. What more could you want?" was what my Dad usually said. And I agreed.

As I was heading downstairs, I heard snoring, and noticed that the door of May's room was slightly ajar. Thanks to the dirty socks piled on her floor, I guessed that she hadn't been able to

close her door all the way last night. May was sixteen now, and she had just started what my parents called "the difficult age." I thought she was just being a brat.

I made my way to the kitchen. Mom turned at the stove to smile at me. "Good morning, Zack."

"Morning!" I said as I sat at the table.

Dad just nodded. May and I had both inherited Dad's golden blond hair, though his was starting to fade silver at the temples. But unlike my Dad, who was built like a solid wall, I took more after my Mom, especially her slender face and build.

For the past few years, I had been holding out for another growth spurt, but now that I was nineteen, that hope was growing dim. I stared at my dad's sheathed sword and shield hanging on the wall, which depicted the titular hero and heroine of *The Knight and The Lady.*

There were many versions of the story, from puppet shows to children's books to traveling plays, but every version held one thing in common: at the end of the story, the Knight would always promise to lovingly spank the Lady, and the Lady would always promise to obediently submit to her spanking. Some of the versions even showed the Lady getting her first spanking, and it was always delivered on her bare bottom.

I especially loved that part of the story in particular.

Mom caught me by surprise as she set my plate down in front of me. "Admiring the art on your father's shield again?"

I felt my cheeks burning. "Yeah, it's…good workmanship."

I had a weird feeling Mom knew my secret. Of course, it was only right and proper for men to spank women, when they deserved it. That was one of the most basic morals we'd learned growing up.

As I wolfed down my eggs, Dad gave me a wry smile. "Ready to haul some hay for the market day?"

"Yes, sir. What're we selling from the garden today?"

Mom produced a basket of produce. "Cucumbers. We got plenty more than we need."

Dad stroked his chin. "That should bring in enough to replace the old plowshare. Plus a new wooden spoon for your mother, and…"

Trailing off, Dad glanced at the stairs. "...Is May still sleeping?"

I sensed trouble. Only yesterday, May had been threatened with a spanking for missing morning chores. "Well, I didn't check her room, but I think she is. Why?"

"Go wake her up, please. She should help load the cart, in any case."

I went upstairs and knocked on May's door. "May? Breakfast. We've got work to do!"

But answer came there none. "May?"

I knocked again, and as the door creaked open, a pile of rumpled clothes tipped over. I almost fell down in shock. "Oh, Hell!"

May's clothes were everywhere.

And there was May, sitting in front of her looking glass, snoring loudly, wearing a mismatching skirt and blouse. She must have been so preoccupied trying on clothes, she'd forgotten to go to bed.

I grasped her by the shoulders. "May! Wake up?"

May's eyes fluttered open and fixed on me. Then she flailed her arms, slapping my face as she tumbled backwards. "Yeek! You creep! How dare you come barging into my room?"

I winced and held my stinging cheek. "Oh, this is your room? Looks more like a battleground to me! Better clean it quick, or else–"

"Or else *what?* You gonna tattle on me, you sniveling, little…uh-oh…" May stammered.

I turned around.

Dad was standing at the doorway, and he didn't look happy. "May, your mother told you to go to bed at sunset last night. Clean this mess up. In ten minutes, I'll be back, with the big wooden spoon. If your room is clean by then, I will only use my hand."

May's hands flew to her bottom. "No, Dad! I'll clean it up, I swear! Don't spank me!"

"No, May, you will get a spanking in any case. But if you don't obey, it will go worse for you. Much worse."

Dad put a hand on my shoulder. "Come back down. May needs some time to be alone."

Silently, I followed him downstairs. Dad found Mom in the kitchen, and gestured to her cookware. "Dear, I'll need your wooden spoon."

Mom sniffed as she produced it. “Let me guess, May stayed up all night playing dress-up again?”

“Afraid so. She’s got at least one spanking coming. Hopefully I won’t need to use the spoon, but I don't want her to think I'm all words."

Mom nodded curtly, and put the spoon in Dad’s hand. “She’s obsessed with clothes these days! What will she do in a few more years? No man will want to marry her if she keeps acting like a flighty feather-head!”

Dad sighed. "You’re right. I have to put a stop to this."

I said nothing. The idea of bratty May getting her bottom burned appealed to me. For the past few weeks, May had been testing her limits, though Mom and Dad had been letting her off easy with a few warning swats.

Dad set the spoon down on the table, eyeing me seriously. "I hate to do this…But I think I would do her a lot worse by not spanking her for this."

I eyed the spoon. It had been over seven years since my last spanking. "Absolutely. She's getting way too snotty."

We ate our breakfast in silence.

After I finished, I helped clear the table, but just as I was about to start cleaning the dishes, Dad halted me. "You know, Zack, you are growing up to be a fine young man."

I grinned. "Might be, Dad."

"It's around the time you should find a nice girl of your own, you know."

I tried to scrub the dishes to hide my embarrassment. "Ha! Not likely to happen anytime soon"

Mom snickered as she bumped me aside, and took over washing the dishes. "What do you mean? I think you’re quite a catch. There’s bound to be a few girls round the village who’ve caught your eye."

My face felt hot. "What? This village? There are, correct me if I'm wrong, exactly three girls of marrying age. Sue is engaged to Jimmy the Smithy. Angie has her eyes on the schoolmaster. And Greta is...well…"

I didn't have to finish the sentence. We all knew Greta. Apart from her widowed mother, Greta was the village’s more fearsome husband-hunter. If I married her, I would end up a slave in my own home.

Greta’s mother was rumored to be a wicked witch, with knowledge of making love potions, but I thought the comparison unkind to witches in general.

Last year, when Greta got young Richard drunk and pulled him into the bushes, the only thing that saved him from fate worse than death was when he saw her mother's eager face hidden in the undergrowth, ready to be a witness to her daughter's "shame."

Dad shrugged, and led me out of the kitchen. "But there are lots of fine girls in the city. They say Ceris is drowning with unwed beauties. Or there’s the college in Cant. Women love a man who knows how to read."

"Dad, I'm only nineteen. I have time! You didn't marry until twenty-five!"

Dad nudged my shoulder. "Fair point. I’m just saying…I think you’d make a good father."

He paused. "Tell me, do you think your sister deserves a spanking?"

"Of course!"

Slowly, Dad took up the wooden spoon, and slapped it against his palm. "Girls, Zack! They are a peculiar bunch. Sometimes, they go hog wild! Who knows why. But as a man, you may have to be responsible for a young woman soon. And in that case, if a young woman in your charge misbehaves..."

"You spank her. I know." At the thought of spanking a woman, I felt my throat go tight.

As long as I had been alive, I had never once seen nor heard Dad spank Mom, though she told us often enough that, if she ever forgot to be a good wife and mother, she fully expected him to tan her hide. It was common sense, she claimed.

But Dad had assured us that Mom was the epitome of a wise woman, and hadn’t needed a spanking for as long as he could remember.

Of course, I knew all husbands had the legal right to spank their wives, and that the custom was considered foundational to a good marriage. But the situation wasn’t quite so bad, at least not for a decent, grown woman like Mom.

However, all the girls in the village (with possible exception of Greta) were spanked. And usually, the spankings continued even after girls were married, at least for a few years.

It was different for boys. I got my last spanking at the age of twelve, for something I don't even remember anymore.

But whenever I went out in the evening, I always overheard familiar noises coming from at least one house in the village. Hard crying, accompanied by even harder slaps.

And I liked it.

"Son? Are you listening to me?"

I blinked. "Sorry, Dad, I dozed off..."

Dad chortled. "I was saying that there's an art to these things. You have to spank a girl with care. You have to have the grasp. When you finally find a girl, you must know how it's done!"

"Your point is, Dad?"

Dad beckoned me to follow him up the stairs. "Come with me. Your sister is due a good spanking, and I'm going to show you how to give one."

I gulped. I didn't expect this, but it sounded incredible. "Okay, Dad!"

Dad held me back outside May's room. "Don't say anything. Just watch. Don't make it worse for her, you hear me?"

I nodded.

Dad knocked. "May? It's me. It's time for your spanking, girl. Open the door, please."

The door opened. May was already dressed in her simple, brown work clothes, and it looked like she had been crying.

The clothes were no longer scattered all over the room, but there were still a couple small heaps of them.

Dad shook his head. "May? I told you to clean this room, didn't I?"

May glanced desperately at the piles of clothes. "Please, Dad! I just couldn't do it in time! But I tried!"

Dad sighed. "You never should have let it get into such an awful state. And I promised you that you would get a taste of the wooden spoon, if you didn't obey. What do you think, Zack? Do I have to give May an extra spanking with the wooden spoon?"

I tensed. Sure, May could be a brat sometimes, but she was still my best friend. "Well, I know that's for you to decide, but…I hope not."

“Good answer. If May had disobeyed, I was planning to give her *three* spankings, and use the spoon right off the bat.”

May’s eyes went wide. “Three spankings?”

Dad held up his fingers to count. “One for disobeying your mother, a second for being cruel to Zack, and a third if you didn’t tidy your room. But, May, I can tell you tried your best to clean up. So, you will only get two spankings. A good warmup, with my hand–and ten spanks with the wooden spoon!"

May threw back her head and howled. "Daddy! Noooo!"

"Or should I make it fifteen spanks?"

May stood straight, like a soldier. "No! Definitely not! Ten is fine!"

Dad handed me the spoon. "Hold onto this for me. I’ll need it later."

May finally noticed me, and her face paled. "Dad? Why is he here?"

"Because I heard you call him a cruel name, and I saw you slap him. Besides, one day Zack will have his own family. He should know how to deal with naughty girls."

At the mention of the word “naughty,” May’s face burned red. "But, Daddy, I don't want him to be here!"

Slowly, Dad fetched a chair, and set it in the center of the room. "That's none of your concern, May. As I see it, you still don't have anything to be ashamed of. Sometimes…"

Dad sat down, and reached out to pat May’s bottom. “...You just have to grit your teeth and *bare* it."

May’s eyes popped open as she felt the gentle love taps, then she snorted, resisting the urge to laugh. "...Dad!"

He chuckled. "Sorry, I couldn't resist. Now, May, you were a very naughty girl, you know that?"

May sighed. "Yes, sir."

Dad’s face was calm. "And you deserve a good spanking, don't you?"

May hung her head. "Yes...Daddy."

"So come here, and get over my knee."

It was quite fascinating. The mere prospect of a spanking turned bratty May into a sweet little girl, much more courteous than usual.

May took a tremulous step toward Dad, then bent over his right leg, lying on her tummy across both his knees. With a single practiced motion, he flipped up her skirt and pulled down her underpants. "Zack?"

I swallowed a lump in my throat. There was a knot in my stomach, exactly like when I got my last spanking. "Yes, Daddy?"

I bit my lip as I heard my own slip of the tongue. I hadn't called my father "Daddy" since I was a boy, still young enough to be spanked.

But if Dad noticed, he gave no hint of it. He only waved a finger. "Come here, son."

I stood behind my father and looked over his shoulder. May's bare bottom was on full display. I must have overheard thousands of spankings, but I'd never witnessed one up-close before.

May kicked her legs slightly, but she seemed to have fully resigned herself to her fate.

Dad smiled. "See? I was angry with her this morning, but I'm not anymore. And she's not angry with me. Civility, that's the key. She realized what she did wrong and she accepted her punishment. She's already becoming a better girl. However, May…"

He raised his hand high, "...I'm afraid, this is still necessary, young lady."

Dad brought his hand down, producing a crisp smack!

May yelped. "Ouch!"

I was almost hypnotised by the sounds of palm against buttock.

*PLESK! SPANK! SLAP!*

After another three firm spanks, Dad fell into a steady rhythm. "Your goal here, Zack, is to cause her as much discomfort as possible, without doing any lasting harm."

His voice was strangely calm, and he spanked without missing a beat. "She should feel the effects for some time. Note the pink color of her bottom. As you spank her, it steadily gets redder and redder. After it's bright red, that's usually a good time to stop."

Already, May was sobbing and hiccuping, throwing herself around on Dad's lap.

"Never. Spank. In anger." Dad punctuated each word with a loud slap, spanking more slowly than before. May howled as she felt each one, but Dad didn't seem to mind.

"After you're done spanking, you should comfort her, but right now–you need to be as strict as possible."

May was crying freely now, her long blonde hair in disarray. "Please, Daddy, stop already! Stop!"

Dad added a few more spanks with full swings of his arm, then stopped and carefully examined his work.

"Seems good. All right, Zack, hand me the spoon."

Immediately, May started to squirm. "No! Not the spoon!"

"Ten spanks, was it?" asked Dad, calmly. "Or was it fifteen? Or..."

May tensed, her feet freezing in mid-air, mid-kick. "No! Just ten, sir!"

Dad patted the spoon against her bottom. When May didn't kick in response, Dad seemed satisfied that the rebellion had been quelled, and turned his attention back to me. "Your hand is usually more than enough. But you should be prepared to use something worse if the need arises..."

He raised the wooden spoon high and brought it down across her right buttock, with a resounding slap*,* louder and heavier than before.

May squealed. "Aaaah! Daddy, no!"

"A wooden spoon is plenty painful by itself. But getting it across an already-spanked bottom… has a certain impact!"

Another clap, and another of May's cries.

"Find something you want to use–it could be a belt, a hairbrush, even a slipper in a pinch–"

Silently I counted the third slap. May wailed. "Aaaaaaaaah!"

"...But only use it as a last resort..."

As May clenched her glutes, the fourth stroke bounced off her tensed left buttock. "Nooo! Please, no!"

"...It won't work if you use it every time."

The fifth stroke flicked sharply against her right buttock. "Aaaaiii'll be good!!!"

"Don't hurry, she should get plenty of time..."

Just as May untensed her butt cheeks, the sixth stroke landed, sending ripples through her left buttock. "Eeeeeee!"

"...to feel each stroke."

The seventh stroke sank deep into her right buttock. "Pleeease!"

"...But you shouldn't hit too hard..."

I knew that Dad was holding back his full strength, but the eighth swat sounded plenty hard. May melted into uncontrolled bawling. "Baaaaah!"

"...since you could really hurt her."

Dad delivered the final two spanks one after the other in quick succession. In the midst of her woes, May seemed to snap awake. "Aiiiiiiieee!"

Dad gave me back the spoon. "Just a few tips, Zack."

He stood May up and her skirt fell down over her bare butt. She immediately clutched it.

Dad stroked May’s head. "Now, May, will you be a good girl?"

May bounced on her heels, holding tight to the seat of her skirt. "Yes! Yes!"

"Did you learn your lesson?"

Finally, May looked up at Dad, her eyelashes sparkling with teardrops. "Yes, Daddy!"

"I won't have to repeat this anytime soon, right?"

May shook her head so hard, she sent tears flying. "No, Dad! Definitely not!"

"Good. That's how it should be."

He hugged her. "I'm sorry I had to do this, but you really deserved a spanking."

Releasing her hold on her backside, May returned Dad’s hug. "I know.... Thank you, Daddy."

After May had calmed down, Dad and I left.

Our old work horse, Sandy, pulled impatiently at her reins.

I thought about what I had just seen as I helped load the cart. "She will be mad at me. If I hadn't woken her up so quickly–it's my fault she got spanked."

"No, it was her fault. And it's over now. She'll have time to cool down before we get back. And talk to her mother about what happened. Girls her age need to talk to their mothers a lot."

"Why?"

He shrugged. "No idea, Zack."

Sandy neighed, as if to laugh at me.

…

Ceris was only an hour's travel by cart. Thanks to our early start, we arrived mid-morning, and our hay was in high demand. After unloading the last of our hay at the city stables, we made our way to the city square, where the farmer's market was held for the upper-classes.

We found our usual spot before the afternoon rush, and set up a separate table for Mom's garden produce.

I groaned as I watched people going in and out of the latrines that adjoined the public bathhouse. "I don't know why you insist on setting up so close to the privies."

Dad looked at me with mischief in his eye. "It's the perfect location. Sooner or later, everyone has to use the toilettes."

"...the toy *what* now?"

"You haven't seen them? Ah, that's right, you were sick last time. They're a new sort of privy. All the rage among the nobility."

"What, are they solid gold?"

"Better than that. They use copper pipes for plumbing. After you answer the call of nature, you pull a chain and the water simply…flushes the waste away."

"To where? The street? They can't have a lagoon big enough for everyone in Ceris."

“It all goes into the new sewer system, to outside the city walls. The Mayor of Ceris commissioned it himself. I think it’s genius. It’s eliminated the need for soil men to haul shit.”

“Must be rough times for men who haul shit for a living.”

I froze as I overheard the sounds of a spanking in progress, muffled, but unmistakable, coming from within the public bathhouse. Of course, how could I have forgotten? There was one more thing that everyone used the public bathhouse for: spanking a misbehaving child, or for that matter, spanking any grown woman foolish enough to act like a misbehaving child.

Dad snapped his fingers. “Zack? Pay attention. I need you to watch out for thieves while I’m out drumming up business.”

I blinked. “Thieves? What are thieves doing in Ceris?”

Dad harrumphed. “Stealing, of course. What else would they be doing? They’re all good friends of other people’s property.”

But before I could answer or ask any more stupid questions, Dad scooped up a basket and marched off, ringing a bell to attract more customers.

Blushing furiously, I stood at attention at the stall. With every passing moment, another city-dweller passed me by, in a steady trickle, like a slow stream. A young, well-dressed couple glanced at my stall, and I smiled, before they leered at me and brushed past, muttering something about rural peddlers. Dad had once told me I needed to develop my knack for salesmanship, but I wasn’t sure how to begin.

Then the bells tolled the hour for noon, and more of the residents of Ceris emerged from the inns and workshops that clustered around the city center. The stream of people gradually swelled to the size of a river. I caught the eye of a beautiful, brown-haired girl, about my own age, and called out. “Hey! Want some food?”

The girl stiffened, and quickly backed away, shaking her head, before she disappeared in the teeming crowd. I took a deep breath, that turned into a groan. Talking to people didn’t work. *Not* talking to people didn’t work. How did my Dad make this look so easy? “Oh well. At least I can still help. I just need to keep a wary eye out for–”

“Stop! Thief! Bring back my apple!”

I snapped my head around to find the source of the cry. An old woman standing behind an apple stall was shaking a bony fist at a young girl, probably about twelve-years-old, wearing a frilly dress. The girl jumped, then tried to hide something behind her back. “No! I was only looking! I wasn’t going to–”

With surprising speed, the old woman snatched the girl by the arm and pulled up her hand, revealing the damning evidence. The girl was clutching tight to a bright red apple. “Thief! Call the watchman! I’ll see you flogged!”

Some of the crowd paused to watch the unfolding scene. The girl looked around desperately, only to find herself surrounded by unfriendly faces. “No, no, no! I was just going to show it to my Daddy! He’ll buy it for me!”

The old woman rapped her finger against a painted wooden sign, lifting the girl’s arm, forcing her to twist around and dance on her feet. “You nasty little liar! Can’t you read? It says right here, plain as day, hands off the merchandise! Where’s the watchman? I want to see this brat get what’s coming to her!”

Then the old woman delivered a firm slap across the seat of the girl’s skirt. Instantly, the girl dropped the apple, and started to wail. The old woman hooked one arm across the girl’s back, and roughly bent the young thief over, pinning her tight against her side. Raising her gnarled hand high, the old woman started delivering slaps across the girl’s rear end.

Before I knew what I was doing, I had stepped forward into the center of the circle of people. “Hold on! Where’s this girl’s father? He’s the one responsible for her.”

The old woman’s hand froze in mid air as she leered at me. “Mind your own beeswax, boy!”

I stood my ground. “You’re making a scene in front of my stall. That makes it my beeswax–em, makes it my business.”

The old woman patted the girl across her bottom, then raised her hand. “This girl needs a good spanking, and I’ll see that she gets one, *before* I have her clapped in irons.”

I caught the old woman by the wrist before she could slap the girl again. “No. That’s her father’s decision. Not yours.”

“Daddy? Help! Save me, Daddy!” screamed the girl.

A richly-dressed man emerged from the crowd. “What’s wrong?”

The old woman scowled, and pointed at the apple at her feet. “This girl’s what’s wrong! She’s a thief!”

The girl shook her head furiously. “No, Daddy! I wasn’t going to steal it! I was just looking at it, until–”

The man knelt to look his daughter in the eye. “Elizabeth, I already told you I wasn’t buying you anything else today. I *explicitly* told you not to touch anything at the market.”

“But I only–”

The man stood and faced the old woman. “If you’re willing to overlook this, I’m ready to pay for twice the cost of the apple. I promise you, my daughter will be punished…*soundly*.”

The old woman scratched the stubble on her chin, and released her hold on the girl. “Hmm, fair ‘nuff.”

The man handed her a few coins, stooped to pick up the apple, and handed it to his daughter. “There you go, Elizabeth. Take a good look. When I’m through with you, your bottom’s going to match the color of that apple.”

Blinking, Elizabeth stared at the apple, as if only now realizing for the first time just how red an apple could be. Then, as her father scooped her up under the armpits, Elizabeth shook her head. “No, please, Daddy! Not that! Anything but that!”

But her father only draped her over his shoulder and carried her toward the public bathhouse. A few of the onlookers started to giggle. Still clutching tight to the apple, Elizabeth howled. “But I’m *too old* for a spanking!”

At that, some of the women in the group guffawed even more loudly. After all, no girl was *ever* too old for a spanking. Poor Elizabeth was about to get a painful reminder of that reality. I sighed. Maybe Elizabeth had been planning to steal the apple, in which case, she was getting off easy with just a spanking. But even if she had been telling the truth, she had still disobeyed her father. Either way, a spanking seemed like a just penalty to me.

Just as Elizabeth’s father carried her into the public bathhouse, a mother led her crying daughter out the door. The girl was bawling, clutching at her bottom. Then the mother pulled out a handkerchief and started dabbing at the girls’ eyes.

Of course, in a city as large as Ceris, there was always demand for a place to spank a misbehaving child, especially girls.

I recalled that the middle door of the public bathhouse led to a shared hallway which served as a dedicated spanking room. There were just too many children who needed an attitude adjustment, and too many parents who couldn’t wait to mete it out.

Any moment now, Elizabeth’s spanking would begin, and there would likely be more pairs of stern parents and terrified children waiting in line before it was over. I’d already overhead so many spankings today, the sounds had become like a sort of background noise.

The girl finished drying her tears, and allowed herself to be led away by her mother. Who was that girl? What had she done to earn a spanking? I had no idea. But I knew that whatever it was, she surely deserved it.

As the memory of May's spanking clouded my mind, I struggled to find where I'd left our stall. If only we weren't so close to the toilettes!

I wondered if I would ever have to spank a daughter of my own. Who was I kidding? I hadn't even met a girl who was interested in me, apart from Greta, who was only interested in the idea of having any man she could get her claws on for a husband. And even if I ever did find the right girl…

I thought out loud. "I might have spank my girlfriend like that, one day…After I get one, I mean."

At that moment, I glanced down at the cucumbers, just in time to see a dainty hand trying to sneak away with the largest one.

I lunged to grab the cucumber back. "Hey!"

The culprit jumped.

It was a girl!

She had short brown hair and big brown eyes, and wore the ragged remains of a brown dress. I guessed she was only a bit younger than me, based on her face. And I couldn't help noticing that she was very pretty, just like a lady from a picture in a fairy tale book.

The beautiful thief turned and ran, still clutching the cucumber. She was shorter than me, but she had a head-start, and easily dodged my grasp. I roared. "Stop, thief!"

I was mesmerized by the sight of her legs as she sprinted away from me like a doe, her tattered skirt fluttering behind her. Then she crashed right into the welcoming arms of a burly watchman.

The girl squealed as the watchman held her tight in a bear hug. He was tall, and despite his fat girth, was clearly well muscled. His scraggly black beard parted to reveal his yellow teeth as he sneered. "Another thief? Naughty, naughty! Didn't your mother teach you that stealing is bad, little missy?"

She gasped as he pinned her tight, and dropped the stolen cucumber. "I'm...I'm sorry...please, let me go!"

Her voice was strained, and I realized that the watchman had knocked the wind out of her. She looked like she was on the verge of tears.

As I came running to a halt in front of them, struggling to catch my breath, I suddenly felt strangely sorry for the thief.

The watchman made an ugly barking sound. With a chill, I realized it was supposed to be laughter. He released the girl, only to snatch her roughly by the wrist and wrench her arm into the air. "Well, we have laws against thievery in Ceris. Do you know what we do with naughty girls who steal?"

The watchman patted something at his side. I thought it was a sword at first, but it was something I'd never seen before. It had a long handle, just like a wooden sword hilt, but with nine thin strips of leather attached to the end of it. The watchman pulled it from his belt and dangled it in front of the girl's face. I recognized it as a sort of flail. I'd seen pictures of knights fighting with metal weapons like it, tipped with deadly metal weights. Though the whips of the watchman's flail were only leather, it still looked nasty. Horrifying.

The watchman smirked, relishing the look on the thief's face. "Leaves nine cuts with every lash. Very unpleasant sight, I'm afraid. But it gets the message across to any other would-be thief."

As I saw the terror in the girl's eyes, I tried to say something, but choked. The man was bigger than me, and he was armed. Somehow, the fear in the girl's eyes made me feel the same fear. Then, I heard a calm, clear voice from behind me.

"What are you talking about? Since when has that been the law in Ceris?"

I turned, and saw my dad behind me. He looked right past me, his eyes fixed on the watchman.

The watchman scratched his black beard, then thrust his arm out to dangle the trembling girl in front of him, as if showing off a haunch of meat for sale at the market. "Haven't you heard? The Mayor of Ceris has finally got tired of putting every penny-pinching pick-pocket on trial. We're tired of having wares stolen. Now, the watchmen have full authority to deal with thieves. So whenever we catch a thief, red-handed, we simply punish them properly and have done with it. You should be grateful."

"What do you mean by a proper punishment? A spanking?"

The watchman snorted, and jabbed a thumb behind his back. "A spanking? You might say that. We haul 'em straight to the scaffold at the center of the marketplace, and deal with them there. The men are flogged. But girls get to feel this across their naughty bottoms…"

With terrifying speed, the Watchman snapped the flail, producing nine whip cracks all at once. I flinched. The crowd hushed at the sound, and turned to look.

The girl was cowering, and I saw her legs trembling. The watchman held her arm high, forcing her to stand on her tip toes. He looked rather pleased with himself. "I believe one hundred

strokes should suffice for…stealing a cucumber, was it? Sorry about the trouble she caused, my good man. Would you like to watch? It tends to be...amusing."

My father spoke slowly, his eyes focused on the watchman. "The last time I saw a girl her age caught stealing, she was only put over a watchman's knee and got a good bare-bottomed spanking, before her father came to claim her. I appreciated that. That was proper. But one hundred strokes with a flail? That's torture!"

The watchmen shrugged. “It’s the law in Ceris. If a woman has no man in authority over her, someone who can be held accountable for her crimes, then she gets treated like any other criminal.”

Father ignored the watchman, and looked at the girl. “Young lady, where is your father? I’m sure he’ll take responsibility for–”

The watchman grunted, and twisted the girl’s arm to force her to spin around in a tight circle, revealing her ragged clothing. “Her father? That’s a good one! Just look at her. It’s clear she’s some homeless urchin.”

The girl yelped, holding onto the man’s thick arm in a desperate attempt to steady herself. “No, please! I don’t want anyone to know I’m–”

Passing me by, Dad took a slow, ponderous step forward. The entire gathered crowd was watching nervously, even a few of the black-bearded man’s fellow watchmen. Suddenly, it struck me that my Dad was the only person here who was even close to the same size as the huge watchmen. Dad spoke to the girl, using a stern, fatherly voice. “Listen girl, I know you’re scared, but you have to think carefully. Do you have a father? Grandparents? An older brother? Anyone who can claim you?”

The girl only shivered, her eyes strangely vacant. It was as if she couldn’t hear a word my dad had said.

The watchman scowled at my dad, then forced a laugh. A few of the other watchmen in the crowd joined in, but only the watchmen laughed, and not even all of them. “All right, you’ve had your joke. She’s *fatherless*. So now she’s ours to deal with. We have to set an example.”

The girl started to cry.

Dad turned his attention from the girl to the man. "And after you beat her, what will happen to her?"

The watchmen shrugged. “Then she’ll be free to go. If she can still walk, of course.”

“Flogged without a trial? That’s barbaric.”

“We’ve always had the right to spank any naughty girl we catch stealing, and I caught her red handed. She knew the risks when she tried to steal that cucumber."

"What cucumber?"

The watchman blinked his beady eyes, twice. “What are you on about?”

Dad held up a basket of cucumbers, and spoke loudly, projecting his voice so that the entire crowd could hear him. “These are *my wife’s* cucumbers, and I haven’t had any stolen. I think this has all been a simple misunderstanding. Right, son?”

The girl squealed, and I realized that the watchman was tightening his grip on her wrist. He grit his teeth in fury. “Nonsense! I heard your son cry, ‘Thief!’ You, boy, you saw her stealing from your cart, didn’t you? Answer me!”

Feeling my throat tighten, I looked to Dad, and he nodded. “Tell the truth, son.”

And somehow, I understood exactly what he meant for me to do. I told the truth. “To be honest, sir, I wasn’t really paying proper attention. I think the girl just took me by surprise is all.”

The watchman bared his fangs. “You little liar! I saw the girl steal the cucumber myself. She dropped it when I caught her. It’s right over–”

He trailed off as he pointed at the spot on the ground where the cucumber had been only moments before. There was nothing but a patch of muddly cobblestones.

The gathered crowd started to murmur. Dad held up his basket with a flourish. “Well, that settles it. I’m not missing any of my cucumbers. Since there’s no proof she did anything wrong, I suggest you let her go. Now. Otherwise, I’m taking this to the Mayor.”

For a moment, the watchman looked murderous. Then, glancing at the onlookers, he forced a fake smile, and released his grip on the girl’s wrist. “So be it. If you hicks want to let orphans steal all your wares, it’s no skin off my nose. Get going, you nasty girl. And if I catch you causing any more trouble…”

He flicked his arm, snapping the leather tongs of his flail across her skirt-clad bottom. She screamed, and hopped high into the air.

“...you won’t get off so easy.” The watchman hooked his flail into his belt, and stomped away. Nervously, a few more of the watchmen followed him, forming a tight formation. The crowd parted to let them pass.

Instantly, the girl ran and hid behind my dad, clutching to the back of his shirt.

Dad, ever the salesman, took the opportunity to sell an entire basket of cucumbers. “Of course, if you’ve tried my wife’s incredible cucumbers, you’d want to steal one too! Why, I’d wager even the most respectable noble in Ceris would happily become a thief, after taking just one bite! Don’t delay! Buy a bushel, today! Only while supplies last!”

I waited until I was sure the watchman was gone, then whispered. "Dad? What happened to the cucumber?"

Dad shrugged. "Somebody stole it. A real thief, mind you. Not like this girl." Dad gestured to the brown-haired girl, who was still clinging to the back of his shirt.

Feeling puzzled, I glanced around at the crowd. "A *real* thief? You mean you didn’t take it?"

“Of course not. Why would I steal my own cucumber? Use your head, son. Whoever took it knew what he, or she, was doing. On the other hand, you, young lady, are not cut out for thievery. I saw you standing around watching my stall from the moment we set up. Always looking around, shuffling, like you were worried someone was going to grab you at any moment.”

I suddenly remembered the girl was with us. “Wait, you knew a thief was watching us? Why didn’t you warn me?”

“I did not know she was a thief. I noticed she was acting suspicious. And I *did* warn you to keep a look out for thieves. I think she only tried it because she saw you weren’t watching the goods.”

The girl mumbled under her breath. “...Sorry.”

Dad twisted to look down at the girl. “Yes, miss?”

Finally, the girl released her hold on Dad’s shirt, and stepped back, eyes downcast, folding her hands in front of her. “I... I'm really sorry, sir. About your cucumber and all."

“What about it? Someone else stole it.”

The girl hunched her shoulders, then held up her head high. There was something strange about her posture. She stood straight and erect, more like a noble lady, not at all like the orphans I’d seen wandering the streets of Ceris before. “Yes, sir, but I tried to steal your cucumber first.”

Dad huffed dramatically. “And a damned fine cucumber it was, if I say it myself. You should never steal, young lady, especially if you don't know how."

"But, I…” the girl’s stomach gurgled loudly, and she blushed. “...I was just so hungry."

Dad waved a finger at the girl. "Well, you should have said so!" he thundered.

Immediately, I recognized the same booming "Dad Voice" he used at home when May or I was in big trouble.

The girl tensed. Then, Dad put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm never one to refuse food to a pretty young lady."

The girl actually blushed. Dat patted her shoulder gently. "You are welcome to join us for lunch. But first, we have to get one thing clear."

The girl still held her prim posture, but she was clearly struggling to contain her excitement. "Yes, sir?"

"You remember what I said about the last time a girl tried to steal from me? And what happened to her?"

The girl looked suddenly nervous. "Yes, sir. She was...spanked on her bare bottom?"

"Exactly. Now, such a punishment would do no good to a real thief. Professional, I mean. Bare-bottomed spanking is a childish punishment, and it should only be done to a girl who behaves as a child. Wouldn't you agree?"

She nodded, then steeled herself. "I did a rather stupid thing, didn't I?"

"Yes, young lady, you did. What's your name, by the way?"

She seemed to struggle to say her name, blushing even more furiously than before. "My name is…Merta, sir."

"Well, Merta, we can't have girls–not even very pretty, very hungry girls–stealing our food. See that bath house? Right through that door is the spanking room. If you're really sorry for what you've done, I think you should march your silly little bottom straight over there, sit your silly little bottom down in the spanking room, and wait for Zack here to come deal with you…and your silly little bottom."

Dad clapped me across the back of my shoulder. "I'll send him along in a few minutes. While you wait, I want you to think hard about what you did wrong and about what's coming to you. Zack's will be spanking your bare bottom, good and hard, to punish you for trying to steal. It won't feel nice, but it will be much better than what the watchman had in store for you. What do you think?"

Tears appeared in Merta's eyes. "I was...silly, sir. I deserve it."

Dad stroked Merta under her chin, lifting her eyes up. "Good. And after you're finished, we are all going to sit down and have a hearty lunch together. And everything will be forgiven."

Merta's eyes sparkled. "Thank you, sir."

Dad pointed to the bathhouse. "Then you know what to do. Go in, and wait for your spanking. Zack will be along shortly."

Merta slowly shuffled toward the bathhouse. She had the look of someone who does not look forward to getting to her destination. Not at all.

In a trance, I watched her threadbare skirt clinging to her bottom, until she finally disappeared behind the door. The moment she disappeared, I grabbed Dad, stammering. "M-me? Why me? You're the one who saved her."

"And you're the one who made this mess by not paying attention. You led her into temptation with your absent-mindedness, so you should be the one to take responsibility, and spank her for it."

I felt my head swimming. "But, Daddy, I've never spanked anyone before!"

Dad shrugged. "You got the theoretical lesson this morning, didn't you? Now it's time for you to get some practice. Be firm, but not harsh. I have a feeling there's more to her than meets the eye."

I pulled at my collar. "But…don't you *want* to spank her?"

Dad peered at me, with a mysterious expression. "Of course not. I have to mind the stall. Also, I hate having to spank a young woman. Even when a woman needs it, it's still an unpleasant business…generally speaking."

A bead of sweat trickled down my forehead. I wondered if Dad knew my secret. "Well, she's probably long gone by now. Why did you send her first?"

Dad craned his neck, glancing at the bathhouse. "Think, Zack. It's a test of character. If she didn't wait for you to come for her, she has no honor. A spanking wouldn't do her any good anyways."

"And if she is still there? What's that supposed to mean?"

Dad smiled. "Do you remember that girl I told you about? The one who tried to steal from me, and got spanked for it?"

"Yeah?"

Dad stroked his chin. "You know, I don't think I ever told you this, but that's how I met your mother."

"...What?"

"Fate, my son, may take curious patterns. When I saw that girl, steeling herself up to steal a stupid cucumber, I thought, perhaps history is repeating itself?"

"You can't be serious. You're still playing matchmaker? I don't know anything about this girl."

He nudged me. "Then go get to know her. I'm not asking you to marry her. I'm asking you to spank her. Hopefully, she'll thank you for it. We gave her enough time to run away if she wanted to. She must feel like she's sitting on pins and needles. Don't keep the poor girl waiting any longer."

A wave of nausea came over me as I entered the spanking room. However excited I was by the distant sounds of spanking, standing inside the room was a different matter altogether. I had been brought here once before, when I was about six years old and threw a tantrum at the stall. It wasn't a pleasant memory.

Merta hadn't run away. She was sitting on a short wooden stool, looking a little tense, but still politely resigned to her fate. A mother and daughter were seated on two other stools, directly across from Marta.

My eyes were drawn to the sturdy, high-backed chair in the back of the room. Unlike the little stools, it had been built especially for parents to use to spank their children. Kids used to call it, "The Seat of Judgment."

A man was sitting there, spanking a girl–probably his daughter. As I looked more closely, I recognized Elizabeth and her father from earlier.

The red apple was resting in front of Elizabeth's face. She was bawling at the top of her lungs, but her father's hand was relentless. He was spanking slowly, but I was sure he already spent the last few minutes making sure Elizabeth's bottom matched the color of the apple, just like he'd promised her.

Shakily, I took a seat on the empty stool beside Merta. Across from us, the strange girl stared at us, and waved. She looked about eight years old, and bore a striking resemblance to her mother.

"Hi!" she said brightly. "You came to spank her, right?" She pointed at Merta.

I didn't know what to say, but Merta nodded, folding her hands demurely on her lap. "Yes, he came to spank me."

The girl nodded. "I will get spanked with Momma's hairbrush," she said, to no one in particular.

I tried to keep my face neutral. "That must hurt."

"Yeah," the girl sighed. "But Momma says I must get a good spanking because I was naughty."

"And you *will* be getting a good spanking, young lady," said her Mom sternly, before turning to us. "I'm afraid my daughter threw a temper tantrum, and overturned an entire apple cart. Didn't you, Emma?"

Emma kicked her feet. "Yeah…Were you naughty too, lady?"

Merta smiled. "Yes. I'm ashamed to admit it, but…I tried to steal a cucumber."

Emma's mother raised an eyebrow. "Be careful what you say. You never know when a watchman might be listening in. I take it you're the offended party, young man?"

I swallowed a lump in my throat, and started talking without thinking. "Um…my Dad says I gotta spank her bare bottom."

The mother smiled, and nodded curtly. "Finally. Some common sense."

Emma rocked in her seat, staring curiously at Merta. "So, you will get a hairbrush spanking too?"

Merta stiffened. "I... I hope not..."

"No, she won't," I answered. "I don't even own a hairbrush."

Emma's mom pulled a hairbrush out of her purse. "You can borrow mine. Ah–I think, Emma, it's our turn."

Finally, Elizabeth's father stopped spanking her. Carefully, he stood her up and let her cry for a while. After Elizabeth got control of her tears, he pulled her panties back up, and led her out.

After they disappeared, Emma whistled with undisguised admiration. "Finally. That was a tremendously long spanking. I wonder what she did to deserve it?"

I answered without thinking. "She tried to steal an apple. At least, maybe she did. I don't know if it was on purpose."

Emma’s mom scoffed. "Then her father was far too mild with her. Nothing beats a good hairbrush, right, Emma?"

The mother stood up and went to the chair, hairbrush in her hand. Emma looked at her with sudden worry. "Momma, please..."

Emma’s mother patted the hairbrush firmly against her lap. "Oh, come on, trying to act all brave, and now this? You were a naughty, naughty little girl, Emma, and naughty little girls get the hairbrush. Skirt up, panties down and bend over my lap!"

I sat next to Merta and we watched in shared fascination as Emma silently obeyed and assumed the position. For a moment, Emma’s bare bottom seemed to shine, poking in the air, right before her mother started to apply the hairbrush.

Emma reminded me of May and the wooden spoon. She started crying almost instantly, and she was kicking fiercely.

Her mother shook her head. "I don't like to do this to you, Emma, but your behaviour was unforgivable today!" The hairbrush kept rising and falling. Emma’s cries built to howls.

Finally, Emma bucked her feet so hard her panties flew off.

Delicately, Merta picked them and set them on the stool.

"Thanks, my dear," said Emma's mom.

As Emma's spanking continued, Merta looked increasingly more uneasy. Suddenly, she clutched my arm, and I felt a thrill travel up my spine. Why was Merta holding me, if she was scared of a spanking? After all, I was the one who was going to spank her.

Finally it was over. Emma hollered and hopped while her mother calmly set aside the hairbrush. Then she hugged her daughter. "I hope this will be enough motivation for you to be good from now on!"

Emma just nodded, fighting to catch her breath past hiccups. Emma’s mom held up the hairbrush for me to examine. “Sure you wouldn’t like to borrow mine? I guarantee it will make a profound impression on your friend, the repentant thief.”

I felt Merta’s fear as she examined the hairbrush, and shook my head. “Thank you, ma’am, but since I’ve never spanked someone before…I figure I’d better stick with the basics this time. But don’t worry, I plan to be very fair with her.”

The mother cooed. “Aw, how sweet. Stick close to this one, miss. He seems like a keeper.”

Emma rubbed her eyes, her breath hitching. “Hic! Goo–good luck, lady!”

Emma’s mother scooped her up, and carried her out the door. Emma winced once as she felt her bottom press against her mother’s arm, then set her head down, nuzzling close to her mother.

Finally, we were alone in the room.

I took a deep breath, and looked at Merta. I tried to make my voice sound steady, like Dad’s was. "Well, Merta, it's time.”

Merta looked at me with eyes like a frightened deer’s. "It will hurt a lot, right?"

"That's a stupid question, Merta. Of course it will hurt." I sighed. "Look, I want you to know that I'm not angry with you. It's just that Dad asked me to..."

I wanted to say, “spank you,” but my throat caught at the thought of spanking.

Merta spoke before I could struggle to say the dreaded word. "It's the right thing to do. He lied to the watchman because of me. And he lost a cucumber. It's just that...when I saw those poor girls, getting spanked, I realised that I'm going to be spanked next. I know I deserve the spanking, but still...I just *don't want* to be spanked."

"Well, uh–how are you normally spanked?"

Merta looked down. "I’ve never never spanked, Zack."

I stared at her. That was impossible! Everyone got spanked as a kid, even boys! "Come on, you can't expect me to believe that."

She was silent.

I stood up from my stool, trying to make myself look calm and collected. "Okay. In that case, I will spank you the same way my younger sister is usually spanked. She’s about your age. Does that sound fair?”

Merta nodded.

I sat in the high-backed chair, and patted my right thigh. “Come here, Merta, and bend over."

Merta did, but she was trembling the whole time. I decided to go easy on her, at least compared to what May would have gotten if she had ever been caught stealing.

I flipped up the patched rags that represented Merta's skirt, and tugged at her white panties to find…nothing! Her panties clung tight to her bottom, as if refusing to budge.

"Er–maybe you could–you know…lift your bottom a little?"

Silently, gracefully, Merta raised her hips. The gesture caused her bottom to slightly press against her panties, a little more fully.

On my second attempt, the panties slid down neatly. Merta had a smooth, round little bottom. And to my shame, I felt a thrill of excitement.

This bottom was all mine to spank, and the longer I looked at it, the more I wanted to spank it, and spank it hard.

But then I thought about Merta's fear, and felt sorry for her. This wasn't just about her bottom. Merta wasn't just a butt, a thing that existed for me to spank for my amusement.

Merta needed this spanking, and she had asked for it. And even though we had only just met, I knew that what Merta needed right now was a friend she could trust to spank her, and I was determined to help her. But even as I resolved to do my best for her, at the same time, I couldn't help but think how strangely "spankable" Merta seemed.

I raised my hand high.

"Ready, Merta?"

Merta's bottom quivered. Then she folded her hands, as if in prayer, and held her bottom high, willingly offering it up for her spanking. "Ready..."

*SMACK!*

I was surprised how intense the feeling was. Her skin was smooth against my palm, and I felt the impact reverberate through her bottom like waves. Immediately, she yelped, and I felt heat slowly rising where'd I'd landed the first spank.

I started to deliver only light spanks, resisting the urge to use the full force of my shoulder and arm. Still, Merta was yelling after each and every one. I wondered if she was play-acting to gain sympathy. My head told me that Merta had to be lying about never being spanked, though my heart wasn't so sure. Based on her reactions, she sure seemed like a frightened toddler, getting her first spanking ever.

Finally, I told myself it didn't matter. If she was lying, she could always confess to me later, and I'd give her a second spanking. But she had willingly accepted this punishment, so I would give

her the benefit of the doubt. Nevertheless, I held my wrist firm, and added a little more follow through to my spanks, slowly building the intensity. This was not the time to be tender.

As I continued spanking, I suddenly discovered a rhythm. In the past, I'd always noticed how spankings had an almost musical quality to them. Now it came naturally to me.

By now, Merta's bottom had developed a pink tint, and she started to kick her feet up against her bottom. I frowned. "Feet down, Merta. You asked for this spanking. Now hold still."

With an effort, Merta pulled her feet away from her bottom, and I lifted my right knee slightly to hoist her hips a few inches into the air. Somehow, I knew instinctively that this would make it harder for her to kick up her feet again.

I started spanking all over again, a little harder, and a little faster. Merta strained her legs, and writhed her hips atop my thigh, but resisted the urge to shield her bottom with her feet. After another minute or two of spanking, Merta started to sob softly, though I could tell she was still resisting the urge to break down completely.

I was impressed. The pink cherry blossom color slowly deepened to a red shade, more closely resembling a cherry fruit than the flower. As I spanked, I thought of the red apple from before, and strawberries, and raspberries, and all the red flowers and fruits I'd ever seen. Whatever the names for all the different shades of red, any of them might apply. I thought of Dad's advice on how, once the bottom was bright red, it was usually time to stop. But as I thought of the stolen cucumber, I decided that, for the crime of stealing, Merta deserved no less than the brightest, reddest bottom I could possibly give her.

I spanked faster, determined to make each and every one count. Merta's sobs grew more desperate, and at long last, she started to cry freely. The sound of her cries struck me. Compared to her earlier yelps and wails, they sounded distinctly "wetter." There was no other word for it.

I recalled how May was usually tearful right at the beginning of a spanking, only to gradually become more desperate.

Merta was almost the opposite of May. Despite all the shouts and yelps from before, only now was she shedding real tears.

I landed a particularly hard clap, relishing the sense of rising heat across Merta's bottom and the tingling sensation across my aching, stinging palm. Merta howled, her voice lowering to an angry snarl. "Agh! Just–just stop already! Stop it!"

I felt Merta slam her full weight down across my thigh. She was surprisingly heavy.

Merta writhed across my lap, and I was forced to press her tight across her waist with my left hand, pinning her against my left leg to keep her from squirming off my lap. She roared, her voice going raspy. “That is *enough!* You…you have no right to spank me! You don’t even know who I am!” She clutched at my pant leg and shirt. Her voice was strangely deep, and despite her anger, there was a cold force behind her words.

Hesitating, I held my hand in mid air. Had I gone too far? I looked closely at Merta’s bottom. I wasn’t sure, but “Crimson” seemed to be the right word to describe it. A tad darker than a good, old-fashioned “rose red,” but not quite the angry scarlet marks that I had seen the wooden spoon achieve for May’s bottom this morning.

I felt my stinging palm, and realized that I had never asked Dad exactly how many spanks I should give a girl for stealing. Even if I knew the number, I’d lost count long ago. Merta was no longer holding her bottom up willingly. Would she be angry at me? Finally, I decided to just do what I’d heard Mom or Dad do, when May or I was on the receiving end. “Why are you getting this spanking, Merta?”

She took slow, deep breaths, her voice still cold. “I stole food…”

I spanked her hard, ignoring the screaming sensation in my palm. With a squeak, Merta kicked up her legs, and shielded her bottom with her dirty, bare feet. I brushed her feet aside, pinning Merta’s legs down at my right side. I was painfully aware that, if Merta didn’t choose to hold still, I had no idea how to spank her. “Why *else* are you getting this spanking?

Then, Merta’s voice calmed, and returned to its usual, delicate tone. “Because…because I asked you to spank me.”

As Merta exhaled, I felt her tension melt away, and knew she wouldn’t fight me if I released my hold on her. I adjusted my grip on her waist to support her weight, letting her hips rest on my left thigh this time. “Then let’s finish what we started.”

Merta sniffled, then relaxed her grip on my leg. “Yes. Please, spank me well, Zack.”

She allowed me to position her across my leg, then slowly arched her back, lifting her bottom high to present me her bottom as a defenseless, open target. It was staggering. So beautiful.

In disbelief, I renewed the spanking, though without the same force I’d mustered earlier. I realized I’d been close to losing my temper before. Now I felt winded. It never occurred to me before that spanking would be such hard work. I settled on spanking gently, but firmly, like I had right at the start. I was worried that Merta would be insulted by my weak effort, but after only ten spanks, she started weeping softly again. Clearly, the long ordeal had worn down her resolve. I carried on spanking gently until she was reduced to racking sobs, but I sensed it was more from emotional remorse than from any physical agony.

That was surely enough, I thought.

I pulled her panties up and stood her on her feet. I felt an urge to hug her, but held back, not sure if it would be disrespectful. But she hugged me instead, solving this little dilemma. "I'm...I am *so* sorry you had to spank me, Zack! Thank you"

As she buried her face in my shoulder, I examined my hand. It was flaming red and sore, but strangely enough, I found I quite liked the feeling. It seemed strangely fitting. My hand matched Merta's bottom.

I wasn't the least bit sorry that I had spanked her. In fact, I thoroughly enjoyed it.

*"Hold that thought,"* I said to myself. *"You shouldn't enjoy this–or you might end like that watchman."*

…

Merta cried for a few minutes before she felt ready to leave.

"Well?" asked Father after we came back. "Did you learn your lesson about stealing, young lady?"

Ruefully, Merta rubbed her bottom. "Yes, sir. I most certainly did."

He nodded. "Good. In that case, we should eat. I know a quiet spot away from the bustle. My wife made us sandwiches."

Dad held up the sandwiches. As Merta examined them, I could almost hear her counting. Three of us. Two of them.

Merta looked up sadly at my Dad as she accepted a sandwich. "But…what are you going to eat, sir?"

He smiled, and held up the last of Mom's vegetables. "There are always cucumbers."

…

Traffic was slow, and we were crowded by farmers and locals on all sides. All the visiting farmers were trying to get out of Ceris before the gates closed for the night. Dad sat at the front of the cart, holding the reins.

A shadow fell over us, and I glanced up at an imposing keep that rose above the brownstone city walls. Merta shivered, and crouched low against the cart, wrapping a blanket around her shoulders. Wooden supports made it clear that construction was still ongoing.

As the cart jostled, I caught myself, and pointed up toward the tower. “What’s that for? I thought the border war was over long ago.”

Dad scowled at the sight. “It’s not for war…it’s a new prison.”

I struggled to take in the sight. It was bigger than any building I’d ever seen, even in Ceris. “Looks big enough to hold every criminal in Ceris and Cant, with room to spare.”

“Exactly. Apparently the Watchmen of Ceris have been offering to house every petty thief and highwayman who’s caught in the freelands. Until they can face the King’s Justice, at least.”

“Well, good riddance, I say. Do we even still have a King these days? I thought he died of old age.”

Dad shrugged. “Ceris and Cant have taken to calling themselves ‘The Free Cities’ now. The Lord of Cant is all right, I suppose, when he’s not trying to tax every last radish and turnip before I can dig them up. But Ceris has…changed. If you see the Watchmen on patrol, try to keep your head down. Especially after our run in with that brute.”

I stared at Dad. “Why should I be worried? We’re not thieves, or poachers, or anything.”

Merta sighed. “It’s because of me, isn’t it?”

Dad held a finger up to his lips. Before I could ask why, I heard a shrill cry, and the sound of a roaring crowd. Looking ahead, I saw a crowd of onlookers gathered around a scaffold. I spotted an empty noose that marked it as the local gallows. Beneath this, a group of men sat, locked in stockades. Signs around their necks declared them to be pick-pockets, cut-purses, and such. In a city the size of Ceris, that wasn’t too strange a sight, but then I heard something that sounded wrong.

It was a woman’s voice, crying weakly, followed by the crack of a whip. And then, I saw her. She was standing shakily, her head and hands trapped in a pillory. Her dress had been hiked up above her shoulders, and she was naked below the waist. “That criminal is…a woman?”

Then, a hooded man swung a strange whip across the woman’s lower back. I caught a glimpse of her dirty blond hair flying as she strained against her restraints, shaking. I expected a blood-curdling screech, but there was none. Only a broken, faltering wail.

Dad glanced at the mob, who cheered and jeered at the sight. “Women can’t commit crimes?”

The hooded man delivered another stroke. I realized his tool had multiple leather tongs, at least nine of them, all connected to a single handle. A flail. I swallowed as I recognized the burly,

black-bearded watchman delivering the flogging. “But…where is her husband? If she committed a crime, then he’s the one who should answer for it, not her.”

“Suppose she has no husband?”

“Well, then her father. Or whoever is responsible for her. Every woman is subject to–”

Another lash of the whip cut across the woman’s buttocks. Dad flinched, and pulled at Sandy’s reins to angle the cart away from the scaffold. “She could have been disowned by her father. Or maybe she’s an orphan. Plenty of young women ended up homeless after the border war.”

Next to me, I noticed Merta quietly pull the blanket tight across her face. I looked at Dad, my voice faltering. “But, if she isn’t under the protection of a man…what will happen to her?”

Dad sighed, and glanced furtively back at Merta. “If an orphaned girl is lucky, she can find work as a maid, or train to be an abbey nurse. But if a woman is convicted of a crime, and no man claims headship over her, she is usually sentenced to face the same penalty as any man convicted of the same crime.”

Another crack of the flail, followed by howls, not of pain, but of laughter. There was no blood-curdling scream, like I expected. And then, I finally understood something. The woman was too exhausted to scream.

As we pulled away from the site of the flogging, Merta didn’t react. Her eyes were vacant, her breath still. Finally, she spoke to no one in particular. “What’s happening to that woman…that’s what should have happened to me.”

The crowd cheered, as another victim was led toward the scaffold. I risked taking a glimpse over my shoulder, and saw the woman being dragged toward the tower by her hair. Her legs gave out beneath her, and she went limp.

Dad turned the cart around a corner. “No. That shouldn’t happen to you. That shouldn’t happen to anyone.”

Merta blinked, then seemed to come out of a trance. “But…I’m fatherless. Sooner or later, I’ll have to steal food again, even though I know it’s wrong. And then…”

“Any family member can take responsibility for you, as long as he’s the head of a household and you willingly submit to his authority. Even a woman can act as a guardian in special circumstances. Do you have any family in Ceris? Uncles? Cousins?”

Merta shook her head. “No. I only came to Ceris because I heard there was plenty of food here.”

“And where were you raised, before you came to Ceris?”

Merta gripped the edge of the cart, and tried to stand. “That woman…she’s in danger! We need to help her.”

Instinctively, I sensed Merta was about to jump, and grabbed her. She squirmed weakly against my grasp, then seemed to settle down, as if she thought better of it. She sat her bottom down against my leg, and I distinctly felt the warm after-glow left by the earlier spanking, even through her skirt.

The line of traffic came to a halt. A crowd of farmers were gathered around the gates, waiting to be cleared for exit by the watchmen. Dad reached back and grabbed Merta’s wrist. “If that woman is being locked in the tower, it means she’s been accused of a high crime. We can’t do anything to help her. Right now, we’re helping you, Merta. Is there anyone we can take you to where you’ll be safe? Any place that you call home?”

Merta shook her head. Dad sighed, then released his hold on Merta’s wrist. “You can’t stay in Ceris with that sadistic watchman stalking you. You’ll just have to stay with us.”

Merta clutched the back of Dad’s seat. “For the night?”

“For as long as you need a place to stay.”

Merta glanced at me, then stroked her cheek. “But, I couldn’t possibly. I’m a stranger to you.”

“Merta’s your friend, isn’t she, Zack?”

I was so excited, I struggled to find the words. “Of course!”

“Then that settles it. You’re a friend of the family, Merta. That means you’re welcome in my home.”

Tears welled up in Merta’s eyes. “Even though I’m a thief?”

Dad waved a finger, jokingly. “Correction. You *were* a thief. Zack’s already spanked you for what happened today, so that’s over and done. Of course, if I ever catch you stealing while you live under my roof, you can expect to get the same treatment I’d give my girl May. Care to guess what that treatment is?”

Merta wiped her eyes, and beamed. “Yes, sir. If I ever steal again, you’ll give me a long, hard spanking, right on my bare bottom!”

Dad nodded, and flipped open his satchel. “You’re a remarkably quick learner…Here, Zack. Those penny-pinching tax collectors will want us to have our toll payment ready. Be a dear and count it out for me.”

“Dad! You didn’t count it out earlier?”

“I can never figure out these new Cerisan coins. Used to be so simple. One silver shilling for entry.”

“It’s easy, Dad. Ten cents makes one dubbel, and ten dubblels make one gulden. The toll’s just one percent of total profits now.”

Dad tapped the wooden sign we used to mark prices for our wares. “Yeah, sure. But the inn keeper paid us in good, old Cantian silver. So what’s the toll come to in the new coins?”

“Just one percent of…wait, why did you take Cantian silver?”

“Because the inn-keep wanted to buy four whole bales of hay, and he didn’t try to haggle. It’s good silver.”

“But the tax is based on the new Cerisan coins, not Cantian coins.”

“More’s the pity.”

I groaned, and fished a piece of chalk out of the satchel. “Hang on. I can figure this out.”

Dad winked at me, his voice lightly teasing. “You’d better. I paid that school teacher good money to drill arithmetic into your head. Time to earn your keep.”

As the line slowly progressed toward the city exit, I quickly counted the two styles of coinage. The Cantian coins were stamped with the city crest on one side, and the face of the current Lord Mayor’s late father. In contrast, the new Cerisian coins bore an image of a bundle of birch rods, woven with a thorned vine. I paused as I noticed Merta peeking over my shoulder to watch me work. “Hold on, why are you counting those coins together? The pictures are different.”

I rolled my eyes. “Because they’re both Cerisian guldens.”

Merta picked one up and balanced it on her finger. “But this one’s heavier.”

I froze, and took a closer look at the silver coin. “Dang. This one’s from before the border war. It’s pure silver. Ceris taxes these based on their smelting value.”

Dad made a derisive snort. “So, how does that one work into your math?”

I shrugged. “I dunno. I don’t have a scale.”

“See, this is what I keep telling you. The old coins actually made sense. Now everything’s got to be put into tens, just to make life easier for tax collectors.”

Merta tugged my sleeve. “I have an idea. Do you have any other silver coins? One you *do* know the value for?”

Dad hummed to himself, then fished out a silver coin, holding it up proudly. “Right here. One, good, old, Cantian silver shilling. And it will always buy you two dozen eggs.”

I rubbed my eyes. “But I don’t know the old conversion rates.”

Merta held up the two silver coins, feeling their different hefts and weights. “But they’re both pure silver. Will an approximate weight be enough?”

“Yeah, if I had a scale. Then I’d just compare its weight to the silver shilling to get–”

Merta snatched the chalk out of my hand, and started drawing circles around both coins. “Then we can use geometry to find the answer. I just need a measuring stick. Do you have one, Zack?”

We always carried one, in case we needed to make any carpentry repairs to the cart. Confused, I retrieved our measuring stick from the satchel and handed it to Merta.

Dad turned, and raised an eyebrow as he watched Merta work. After measuring the two circles, she jotted down a short mathematical equation, which I recognized. “Pi, R, squared? The area of a circle?”

Merta nodded, sticking her tongue out as she measured the side of each coin. “Multiplied by the width to get the total volume. I don’t know how to measure the little carvings exactly but…the coin from Cant is about two-thirds the size of the coin from the old coin from Ceris. If they’re both pure silver, then that means three Cantian silvers would just about equal two of the old Cerisian silvers. Does that sound about right?”

Dad slapped his forehead. “Of course! How could I forget? Those used to be the prices for a good spade.”

I read carefully over Merta’s calculation. “How do you know geometry?”

Merta froze. “Oh…I suppose I must have learned it as a child. I’ve always liked drawing shapes.”

I handed Dad the final tally for the city toll we owed. He examined the math with interest. “That’s quite a skill to have. The whole village had to pitch in to bring in a school teacher from the Academy of Cant, just to teach geometry. You should ask her to give you a few pointers, Zack.”

Merta blushed. “Oh, no. I’m sure I’m the one who needs to learn from Zack…he already taught me one lesson today, and I’ll never forget it.”

As Merta looked at me, I felt a strange lurching in my stomach. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to kiss her, pinch her arm, or throw up, but it was some combination of the three.

Then, Sandy whinnied, and stomped her hooves. A young watchman, barely older than me, was blocking the cart. “Halt, in the name of the Free People of Ceris! Captain Feltar, she’s here! I found her!”

I heard a slick, booming voice coming from behind us. “Well, well, if it isn’t our little cucumber thief.”

Merta and I both spun around, and recognized Captain Feltar at once. He was the same black-bearded watchman from before. Another two watchmen followed him at a distance, though they looked less eager than their captain.

Dad tightened his grip on the reins. “What are you doing here? We’ve done nothing wrong, and neither has she. This girl is no thief."

Feltar smirked, then pulled out a roll of parchment from inside his uniform. “And you were right. She’s not some common thief. She’s wanted for something much more interesting…”

He unrolled the scroll to reveal a wanted poster, depicting an amateurish drawing of a teenage girl with brown hair and brown eyes. I instantly recognized it as Merta. The reward promised a hundred gold sovereigns for the capture of the girl alive. “...I am placing this girl under arrest for the crime of witchcraft.”

Merta clutched the wooden sign, holding it up like a shield between herself and Feltar. “No! I won't go back there! I won't!"

Dad glanced suspiciously at Merta. “That’s ridiculous. There’s no such thing as witchcraft, and you know it.”

“Tell that to whoever posted the reward. Don’t worry, girl, they want you taken alive. You’ve got a thrashing coming…but I promise I won’t kill you.”

Dad dropped the reins, and stood to his full height, towering above the crowd. “This girl is under *my* protection. If you lay a hand on her, I promise I *will* kill you.

As I tried to put myself between Merta and Captain Feltar, something caught my eye. As she cowered behind the wooden sign, Merta was surreptitiously free-hand drawing something with chalk. Her hand was shaking as she drew the last straight line, slowly, precisely.

I recognized it as an equilateral triangle, divided into three smaller triangles connected at the center. Dimly, I recalled the name for the shape from the geometry classes I hadn't slept through: it was the symbol for a tetrahedron.

The moment that Merta finished the drawing, she flipped the board. "Zack, get back!"

Feltar's hand flew to his side, and he started to draw a sword from its scabbard. "What's this?"

Then, Feltar second guessed himself. With a quick motion, he thrust out his elbow, ramming it into my gut. I gasped as the air was knocked out of me, before the force of the blow knocked me aside and over the edge of the cart. The last thing I saw before I tumbled out of sight was Merta holding up her chalk drawing. The lines were glowing, with an impossible, intense inner light. Then I slammed down hard on the cobblestone below, scraping my elbows as I barely managed to break my fall.

I almost tripped as I rose to my feet, and several things happened all at once. The younger watchman panicked as he tried to draw his sword, fumbling it. Dad threw his purse of silver coins at the lad with such force, it sent coins bouncing in every direction. The boy screamed and fled, his sword clattering to the ground behind him.

As I spun to look for Merta, I saw Feltar grasping her by the arm, easily pulling her towards him. Then, Merta's drawing *moved*. The central point thrust forward, creating a glowing pyramid that floated in mid air, pointed right at Feltar's breastplate.

Both Feltar and I looked right at the floating pyramid. Frightened, he shrunk away, releasing his grip on Merta's arm, before the pyramid started to slowly rotate in mid air, so that the flat triangular base faced him instead. Feltar lowered his arms, scowled at the pyramid with a look of disgust, then reached for Merta with a snarl.

At that precise moment, the glowing pyramid exploded forward in a pillar of fire, slamming flat into his chest. Feltar roared in pain as the pyramid carried him into the air, before it sent him crashing through a wooden sign that advertised exchange rates for a money changer. Finally, the glowing pyramid exploded like a firework, bursting several canvas bags of coins which piled on Feltar in an endless heap.

As Sandy reared, whinnying in sheer terror, Dad leapt lightly down from our cart and scooped up the young watchman's dropped sword.

Feltar rose from the broken remains of the money changer stand, and jabbed a finger at us. "Kill the men! Just get the girl! I want her alive!"

The other two watchmen shook, looking back and forth from their captain, to my father, who glared at them. Slowly, deliberately, Dad sheathed the boy's dropped sword, then held it up in a defensive guard. "Don't do it, boys. You're not ready to use live blades yet."

Feltar slipped as he tried to steady himself against the pile of coins. "Do it! Kill him, or I'll kill you myself!"

But before they could make up their minds, Dad snatched the wooden sign back from Merta and threw it at Feltar like a rectangular discus. It slammed across Feltar's face with enough force to snap his head back against the bags of coins, knocking him out cold. Feltar looked like he was sleeping on the most expensive bed that money could buy, not to mention the least comfortable one.

That was enough to convince the other two timid watchmen to run for cover.

Dad drew the abandoned sword from its sheath, cut the reins that held Sandy to the cart, and rounded on me. "Zack, Move! Get Merta out of here!"

My legs started to move on their own. I hopped up and over the edge of the cart, and scooped up Merta. She was dainty enough that even I could manage it, with an effort. She squeaked with surprise. "No! Don't get involved. You don't know what they're capable of. They'll–"

I jumped off the other side of the cart, trying to find a path through the terrified faces of the onlookers, anything to put distance between us and Feltar. The crowd parted like a wave to allow us past them. I spotted an alleyway between two half-timbered cottages, and ran into it. I could hear the crowd murmuring excitedly behind us, but the alley itself was empty.

Merta buried her face in her hands, shaking her head. "I'm sorry it ended like this! I didn't want to hurt anyone. I really didn't! But…I'm not going back there!"

I screamed to be heard above the din of the panicking crowd. "Back to where? How did you make that drawing explode?"

Merta started to cry. "I don't know! It just...works that way! Every time I draw that picture, it blows up in my face!"

As I set Merta down in front of me, I suddenly felt exhausted all at once. "Who are you?"

Merta's chest heaved as she gasped for air, between sobs. "I don't…I don't–"

I heard Dad's voice behind me. "She's a Geomancer."

I turned. Dad was blocking the entrance to the alley way, holding Sandy by her reins. He gripped the guard's sword in his right hand. "Merta, how did you learn to do that?"

Merta was taking short, quick breaths. “I don’t know, sir.”

“I knew there was something you weren’t telling us. I thought you were just a runaway. But that shape you drew…the ancient symbol for fire. I know it from an old story. How do you know it?”

Merta caught her breath, and looked at Dad with a serious, almost hurt look. “Sir, I don’t know *how* I know it. I just…know that’s what happens, when I draw that shape.”

“You said you didn’t want to go back. What happened to you before you came to Ceris? What’s the first thing you can remember?”

“It was…a dungeon. They said I had to draw for them. The same drawings. Over and over. Please, sir, what’s a Geomancer?”

Dad shook his head. "Pray that you never find out. Now go!"

And so we ran.

[End of Chapter 1]

[Original illustration by Crosschan]

*The Geomancer*
Chapter 2: The Knight and the Lady

We ran past confused merchants and murmuring locals. Without stopping, I rounded on Merta, “What the hell was that about?”

I saw Merta was clutching her side, gasping for air. “I… I can’t… keep…”

I slowed down, trying to ignore the watchful eyes of the crowd from all sides. I forced myself to ignore the stabbing sensation in my own lungs, and put an arm around Merta’s shoulder. “Come on, Merta, let’s get you home.”

Merta blinked. “Home?”

I put a finger to my lips. Behind us, I could make out the distant sounds of men yelling. “You heard Dad. We’ve got to get home before dark.”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a couple of curious locals roll their eyes, and turn away from us, a boy and a middle-aged woman. The boy whispered. “Uh oh, I bet someone’s in trouble when she gets home!”

The woman clicked her tongue. “I once stayed out late with your Da on Market Day. I got such a spanking, when I got home after dark!”

“Who spanked you, Ma? Da, or Granda?”

The woman blushed, and shooed her son away. “... Never you mind about that!”

Leaving the crowd of locals behind, we walked alongside a rough-looking farmhand and his donkey, and crossed the street. I tried to walk slowly, like I didn’t have a care in the world. I felt Merta tensing against my grip, but held her tight, willing her to understand what I was planning.

We couldn’t run, but we could hide.

The voices of the angry men grew louder. As we rounded a corner, I distinctly overheard one shout, “Has anyone seen a witch girl? She was headed this way!”

An elderly lady’s voice answered. “What, does she have a warty nose, and a pointy hat?”

“No, no! Brown hair! Brown eyes! Brown dress!”

The man’s voice faded to nothingness as we approached the town stables. I sighed with relief. Then it occurred to me that we were surrounded by city walls on all sides, keeping us nice and safe and trapped inside Ceris. I clenched my teeth. There were gates on all four sides of the

city. Maybe we could sneak past the guard at a different exit point? “All right, Merta, now tell me what’s going on.”

Merta looked held up the piece of chalk in her trembling hand. “I’m… a Geomancer? I’ve never heard a name for it before.”

“You mean the magic drawing?”

Merta shook her head. “I don’t think it’s magic. I don’t know any magic words or anything. It’s just… something that happens when I draw that picture.”

I answered dryly. "Any more things you can draw that explode?"

Merta clutched the chalk tight in her fist. "That’s the only one that can blow up, but—well—I do know three more pictures that… do things."

“That’s fine. Just don’t draw the exploding one again without warning me. But, actually, I meant to ask you about something else. *Why* did those men want you?"

Merta shrugged. "I don't know."

I paused, and tried to make my voice sound tough and commanding, the way Dad always spoke when May was in big trouble. "Merta! You said that you’re not going 'back there.' You mentioned something about a dungeon? What was that about?"

Merta pulled away from my embrace, stomping as she turned to face me. "I don't know!"

I raised my voice. "Merta! Do *not* lie to me!"

Merta flinched. Instantly, I felt like a brute. A few strangers glanced at us, and I wanted to kick the seat of my own pants. “Merta, I’m sorry.”

Merta whimpered, then whispered softly. “No. I’m the one who should be sorry. You are a very nice man, and I shouldn't have pulled you into my troubles in the first place."

I shook my head. “What troubles? People can’t just lock you up for no reason. We are a free people. Maybe if we see the Mayor, he could—”

I heard him before I saw him. In the distance, Captain Feltar was shoving past the crowd, bellowing. “Two thieves! Brown haired girl! Blond boy! Did anyone see them pass by?”

An old man held a hand to his ear. “Eh? Nah, I ain’t seen no thieves. Just that cute young couple over there.”

Merta dropped her chalk, fumbling as she tried to catch it. “No! No, no, no…”

I turned, and held out my hands. Stupid. As if that would do anything to hide Merta from Feltar. “She’s not a thief! She’s—”

“The Geomancer!” screamed Feltar, pointing wildly.

Behind me, I saw Merta furiously drawing a strange, eight-sided shape in chalk on the street. The lines started to glow, but as I reached for Merta, my face seemed to slam against a solid pane of glass. Then, I saw ripples in the air, and felt my right arm burning. I had grabbed Merta by the wrist, through some sort of wall of air that separated us. Then, the wind pushed my arm back with such force, it made me punch myself. “Merta! What did you—”

Merta rose into the air, a few feet above me. She was encased in what looked like a giant crystal, made of shimmering triangles. From within, Merta mouthed something, but I couldn’t hear a word she said.

Feltar screamed. “There’s the witch! Seize her!”

I leapt to grab onto the crystal, trying to wrap my arms around Merta. “No! Don’t do it!”

Then, it felt like the ground dropped away from my feet, and Feltar shrank to the size of a child beneath me. In horror, I realized that the earth wasn’t falling. I was flying along with Merta, as she held out her hands to pilot the crystal, a look of sheer terror on her face.

***

As the last of the vendors tore down their stalls in the marketplace, a short woman cloaked in a dull grey cloak stepped out of the crowd and into the shadows of the alleys. She pulled aside her hood, revealing a stern, slender face and vivid blue eyes. Her features were sharp, and her jet black hair was tied back into a neat ponytail. The woman examined a large cucumber in her dainty, black-gloved hand, and took a bite out of it. As she savored the crunch, the woman finally smiled. “Huh. This *is* a mighty fine cucumber, if I do say so myself.”

Then, a flying, brown-haired woman encased in a giant crystal pillar of spinning air came crashing down into the alley, carrying a blond man behind her, screaming as he clung to the top of the geometric shape. The black-haired cucumber thief’s eyes bulged, before she leapt backwards to evade them. She almost made it.

***

I clung for dear life to the crystal. Then I heard a thump, before we crashed into a short, black-haired woman. The force of the impact threw her up and over the crystal, her rear end smacking against my face, before she went spiraling into the air behind me. I felt my fingers

slipping, and with one last look at Merta, I saw her waving at me, as if saying a gentle goodbye. Then I lost my grip on the crystal, and landed face-down on the ground.

I struggled to get back on my feet. “Merta!”

But the crystal was flying higher and farther away.

I was all alone.

At least, I thought I was, until someone stepped out of the shadows and grabbed me. I felt something soft press against my back, and something dangerously sharp press across my neck. A knife blade?

A silky voice whispered into my ear. “I know what you’re thinking. You *really* want to turn around and get a look at me. But trust me, that would be a very bad idea."

It was a husky voice, but to me, it was crying "female.” I tried to peer at her out of the corner of my eye, without moving. All I could see was a grey robe. "Okay, so who are you? What’s with the creepy getup?"

The mystery woman snickered. “The whole idea of this… *getup,* is to not let people know who I am, wouldn't you agree?"

“So you’re a thief. If you’re gonna kill me, then kill me. I don’t have the time!”

The woman made a peculiar mewing sound. "Mmmh? And what makes you think I’m a thief?"

"The knife was sort of a giveaway."

"Humph! I *do* so happen to be a thief. But I'm the *other* kind of thief."

Now, I was completely lost. "The other kind?"

"Yes. I’m no common thief, like the girl who stole your cucumber. I'm the kind of thief who knows how to not get caught."

I felt the knife blade gliding across my throat. "I don't have anything worth stealing!"

Then, the woman flicked the flat of the knife against my groin. “Except your virginity. That’s something worth stealing, I should—!”

I grabbed the woman’s wrist and wrenched it away from me. She squeaked with surprise. “Hey! Cut it out, before someone gets—”

As I twisted her arm, the woman dropped her knife, squealing. As I rounded on her, I tried to grab her, hoping to tackle her, only for her to slam the heel of her palm against my jaw with such force, I felt my teeth click. The woman fell roughly on her rear end, and drew a second knife from inside her cloak. “Stay back! Don’t hurt me!”

I held up my hands, keeping my eye on the point of the knife. “You tried to kill me! You stay back!”

The little woman shook her head, clinging shakily to the knife with both hands. “No, no! That was just for dramatic effect. Look, I’m trying to help you, all right?”

I glanced down, looking for the dropped knife on the ground. “Help me? Why would you…”

Then I spotted Dad’s stolen cucumber. “You stole the cucumber? You saw what happened at the market?”

“It was impossible to miss. I’d been waiting for a perfect distraction all day. Thanks by the way.”

Remembering what dad had said about thieves, I scowled. “So, you pressed a knife against my throat so we could have a friendly little chat?”

“Just a simple precaution. Dad always said I can’t trust teenage boys. And anyway, I helped you. You owe me!”

“What?”

“After the wannabe cucumber thief’s little escapade, I followed you guys, just out of curiosity. I took out a couple of those watchmen creeps who were tailing you.”

“... Took them out?”

“Yeah, and I saw the whole business with the exploding pyramid at the gateway. I had a feeling that if I followed you, you’d make another scene sooner or later, and I was right.”

“So, you saw Merta use her magic?”

“If I hadn’t, you would have just told me about it. You should play your cards a bit closer to your chest. Like your Dad. I tried to follow him after the fight. Figured if he knocked out a few guards for me, I could loot their purses. But, I think he noticed me following him. Once he shook me, I’d almost given up hope on seeing how your little family melodrama would play out, before your girlfriend came crashing down from the sky. She seems like quite the character.”

“She’s not my—”

“Like something out of an old storybook my dad used to read to me. You know, the one about the princess, who gets spanked? Now, how about we try this again? I’ll put away my knife, and you promise me: no funny business."

Before I could ask what she meant by funny business, the woman flicked her knife across her fingers, tossed it with a flourish, then caught it and pointed it right back at me. “You know, no running away, no screaming for help, no biting, kicking, gouging, or pulling my hair. Just keep your hands to yourself, assuming you *like* having ten fingers to count with. Deal?”

I steadied my breathing. “I won’t touch you.”

The woman kept the knife pointed at my stomach for a few seconds. Then she spun it, and put it away. "Good that we understand each other."

I reached to grab the other knife, but the woman snatched it up quickly. I tensed, but slowly, carefully, she sheathed it. Now that I could get a better look at her, I was struck by her small, slender build. Underneath her gray cloak, she wore a solid black, skin-tight uniform. I’d seen pictures of something like that in story books. “You’re part of the Thieves’ Guild of Cant?”

The woman snorted, then flicked aside her black ponytail. “Nope. Stole it from them.”

Something in her posture struck me. Despite the fact she was fully clothed, with nearly every inch of skin apart from her face covered, she still looked strangely indecent. She probably didn't even know how to be decent.

The woman put her hands on her hips, and stuck out her chest. "You may call me Soot."

"That's your name?"

She batted her shockingly blue eyes at me. "No. But you may call me that."

"So, what’s your interest in me?"

"I’m not exactly interested in *you*. But the girl who was with you, she was… very strange, to say the least."

"You tell me. But Merta is—well, she’s long gone by now."

“She won’t get far. Whatever that flying triangle business was, I don’t think she’s figured out how to steer it yet.”

I turned to exit the alleyway and marched. “Enough. I’m going after Merta, before Captain Feltar—”

Soot strolled up alongside me, matching my quick pace. “Those creeps are still after you? Then she’s as good as caught. Just takes two men, one holding each of her arms, and she's powerless."

"You mean her chalk drawings? What do you know about her… powers? What’s a geomancer?"

Soot rolled her eyes. "No clue, really. It looked like magic to me."

I scanned the skies, looking for any sign of flying objects. "They won’t catch her. Merta can fly, so she can run away to a safe..."

I trailed off as I noticed Soot smiling. It was a strange, sad smile. "What safe place? She's not a street child, that’s obvious enough. Probably never had to work a day in her life, just to look at her. If I had to guess, she’s the orphan of some noble family in the country that got routed by the border war. You know, a *lady!* Wouldn’t that be romantic? And now the whole world is against her. She doesn't know anything about running away. She could run from you, because you’re kinda clueless. But hold her hands tight and..."

I felt a cold sweat. "I must find Merta—quickly!"

Soot looked suddenly smug. "Maybe I could help you?"

I glared at her. "For the right price, right?"

"Oh, I might ask for a little… finder’s fee. But don't worry about that right now."

"Now I'm worrying more."

"I won't ask you to do anything illegal."

"Really?"

"Except we’re gonna have to break into the tower prison."

I growled, and stomped away from Soot, scanning the crowd. “I don’t need your help. I just have to find Merta, before that evil old…”

And then I spotted him. Captain Feltar was marching with a lively step, swinging the flail to clear a path through the crowd. At least ten watchmen were marching behind him.

And there was Merta. She was being frog-marched by two Watchmen, one holding each of her arms tight against her back. She was crying and twisting to break free, but all to no avail.

I almost charged to punch Feltar in the face, before I noticed where they were headed. The same scaffolds where I'd seen an unfortunate woman being flogged, and behind that, the tower prison.

Soot clicked her tongue, and drew her knife. "Hah, told ya. I'm always right about people."

Soot flourished the knife across her fingers, and pointed the blade at me. "Now, what say we talk business? You have a fair damsel for a friend, and she seems to be in a bit of distress. I can get you into that prison. So, how much is her life worth to—"

There was a rustle of cloth, and someone grabbed Soot by the wrist from behind, twisting the knife out of her grip. His face was obscured by a dirty, hooded gugel. Soot gasped, and twisted to slam her elbow into her attacker's stomach, only for him to trap her in a one-armed bear hug. Soot squirmed, until the man pulled a knife of his own, and she froze.

Quickly, I snatched up Soot's dropped knife, but when the man bent low to whisper in her ear, his hood pulled back. It was Dad!

Dad didn't quite hold the knife to Soot's throat, but he held it up so she could clearly see it. "Don't… move… Why were you pointing a knife at my son?"

Soot twisted once, then gurgled as Dad pressed her tight. "Wasn't gonna' hurt him… Tryin' to help!"

Dad glanced at me. Slowly, carefully, I put away Soot's knife. "She didn't hurt me, Dad."

"Sounded to me like she was threatening to."

Soot shook her head, eyeing Dad's knife. "I know a way to get to your magician girl!"

Dad looked at me. "Zack, do you trust this thief?"

I wasn't sure I did. "Dad, please don't hurt her. If Soot wanted to kill me, she could have."

"Soot, huh? Well, Miss Soot, my son's vouched for you, so I'm going to put my knife away, slowly. Don't move quite yet. We'll go nice and easy. There."

Dad unhanded her, and Soot stumbled forward. She felt at her knife hilt, then noticed I had her other knife. "Balls! You scared the pants offa' me, old man."

"I should hope I did. Knives are not toys, Miss Soot."

Soot scowled. "I know everything I need to know about knives, thank you."

Dad held up Soot's second knife, and spoke with calm authority. "Then you should already know the first rule: *never* draw a blade, if you're not prepared to use it."

Soot held out her hand. "Ahem."

"Ah, yes. I have something of yours, I believe."

Dad put the remains of the stolen cucumber into Soot's palm. Then, slowly, deliberately, he tucked Soot's second knife into his boot. "Now... What was that you said about breaking into prison?"

***

An hour later, we were standing across the street from the tower of the city watchhouse. I swallowed. "Look at all those watchmen pouring in and out."

Soot shrugged. "Eh, more like dripping in and out."

Dad chuckled. "Must be the changing of the guard for the night watch."

I tried not to look at the guards passing us by. "So what's the plan, Soot?"

"This is the only place in Ceris they can keep your girlfriend locked up. Even if they have a client who's offering a bounty, I doubt they would relocate her so quickly…"

Dad growled. "But who would want to pay so much to capture Merta? Sure, it's strange she's a geomancer, but she's barely more than a child."

Soot shrugged. "I hear there's a new self-proclaimed empress across the border. Calls herself the New Witch Queen."

My ear twitched. "What? Like the big bad hag from the bed time stories? The one who comes to kidnap all the naughty little boys and girls, fairy them off to her black castle, and spank them day and night?"

Soot cleared her throat, and folded her hands behind her back. "Who knows? I used to think geomancy was something out of fairy tales too."

Dad shook his head. "From what I've read about the dark ages, I wouldn't be surprised if those old stories about Raia the Witch Queen had a grain of truth to them. But this new so-called Witch Queen's real enough. There's talk of another border war."

A coach arrived at the tower, and three men stepped out. Immediately, I recognized the big, burly figure of Captain Feltar. The other two men were hauling a woman roughly between them, her arms tied behind her back. The woman was crying, shivering.

I tried to press forward. “It’s Merta!”

But before I could, I ran straight into Soot’s elbow. “Ow!”

Soot shook her head. “This is not the time to be heroic. There's too many of them. In the prison–that's another thing."

Dad eyed Merta and the watchmen until they disappeared into the Tower. “Poor girl. They must have brought her to the Mayor for questioning. Now that they’re through with her… it’s straight to the dungeons with the other criminals.”

Soot swelled her chest, smiling. “Told ya. Watchmen love their predictable little rules and procedures. Now we just have to get you in.”

Dad huffed. “Let me guess, your plan is to sneak in through the new sewer system?”

“It’s… it’s a good plan! Guards don’t like to stick too close to the privies.”

I shook my head. “And what’s the getaway plan?”

Soot rubbed her neck. “At dawn, the watchmen open up the gates and let the morning traffic make their way out in one big rush. They won’t be looking at carts too closely, now that the market day’s over. If anyone stops us, you can just say you were in town looking to hire a few farmhands.”

Dad glanced back at us, frowning. “For that to work, we’ll have to time the breakout perfectly. Maybe half an hour before they notice Merta’s missing and raise the alarm, if we’re lucky. And you’ll need me to get the cart back. No offense, Miss Soot, but you don’t exactly look like a humble farmgirl heading back to the fields.”

Soot scowled. “Why don’t you let me handle the jail break, and you handle the getaway, hayseed?”

Dad took a long, careful look at Soot. I wondered if he was debating whether to bend Soot over his knee for a spanking then and there, in the middle of the street. Dad took a deep breath. “I had to leave the cart and poor Sandy behind in the chaos. I’ll have to track her down… or hope the innkeep will lend me a good horse. I trust him.”

Soot yawned, then stretched playfully. “Then let’s do it! It’ll take us a few hours to get into position under the dungeon. You meet us at the west side of the tower, where the drains are.”

Dad shook his head. “No. Zack should get us the horse and cart, and I’m going with you into the sewers. If you run into any watchmen, you’ll need a man to protect you.”

Soot’s face flushed. “Excuse me? I am perfectly capable of defending myself, thank you.”

“Dad, I should go with Soot into the tower. You’re the one who knows the innkeeper, not me.”

Dad looked anxious. “Just tell him I sent you, he’ll understand… Zack, if you’re caught sneaking into there–”

“Dad, if *you’re* caught sneaking into there, we’re all doomed. You’re… you’re the only one who looks like he’s old enough to be a farm owner. Me, Merta, Soot… they’d take one look at us and think we’re a bunch of runaway teenagers.”

Soot’s eyes flashed. “I’m not a teenager, thank you very much! I’ll have you know I’m…”

Soot trailed off. Dad was looking me right in the eye. Part of me wondered if he was thinking of taking me across his knee for a spanking, right then and there.

Then, slowly, without breaking eye contact, Dad held out his hand. “You’re a good man, Zack. Go help your friend. I’ll be waiting for you at the west side of the tower.

Finally, I shook Dad’s hand, still not sure if I’d heard him right.

His eyes shining, Dad gave my hand a final squeeze, then turned and walked away.

I looked at my hand. Dad had told me I was grown up plenty of times, ever since my thirteenth birthday. But this time, something about the way he said it felt different.

I turned and saw Soot watching me with a smug look on her face, like she was enjoying a traveling theater show. I blushed. “Well, where’s this secret entrance of yours?”

She flashed a cat-like smile. “You’ll see!”

***

And I saw. That was the worst part. The sewer grate was dry and crusted over with a layer of sickly, brownish-red grime. I could only hope it was rust.

Soot was rubbing her hands together. "It's a great plan, isn't it?"

Thankfully, the interior wasn't quite as bad as I imagined. Sure, it stank. But at least I didn't have to swim through raw sewage, like I'd initially imagined. There was a brick pathway carved along the side of the sewers, about three feet wide.

Soot took the lead, using a hooded lantern to light our path. Her voice was oddly gleeful. "Amazing, ain't it? They built these big enough for cleaning crews to get in and out of easily. It's a triumph of modern engineering."

"You're sure this goes to the right part of the dungeon? What if we end up sticking our heads up right in Captain Feltar's personal commode?"

"Nah, they always put the sewer drainage in the lowest part of the dungeon, next to where they keep the worst criminals."

"... How do you even know these things?"

"Me and a few fellow thieves busted out of here once. They made us muck out the shitters all the time. There was this old guy who'd been trying to carve a stone out of the wall for a few decades with a stolen spoon. We threatened to squeal if he didn't let us in on the escape. It'll be a tight squeeze, but it'll take us right to the basement, below the dungeons."

Soot paused, and pointed her lantern light along a wall. "Should be right about… here!"

Soot spotted a stone on the wall that looked identical to all the others, and kicked it lightly.

It didn't budge. Soot blinked, then kicked the stone with force. "What? Funny, I would swear that..."

She set aside her lantern and brushed her hands along the stones. "The bastards! They repaired it!"

I heard a heavy clunk, and a crossbow bolt sank into the wall an inch from her arm.

I turned around. A short, fat guard was standing there, grinning as he clicked a second crossbow bolt into place. "Do you think we're idiots?"

Soot swore, reached for her dagger, then froze as she realized he had a bead on us. "I think you should get bent, you—you—who freakin' squealed on us?"

"The old man. He didn't run as fast as the rest of you. We've had a guard posted here ever since."

Holding my arms high to surrender, I clenched my hands into balled fists. "We want to see the Lord Mayor of Ceris."

The young guard sneered. "He won't do anything. Times have changed. The watchmen are the law in Ceris now. And we know how to deal with criminals like you."

Soot forced a smile. "With a good butt whuppin', in public?"

A second figure stepped out of the shadows from behind the young guard. Instantly, I recognized Captain Feltar's voice. "Oh no, nothing like a public flogging…"

Feltar stepped into the light of the lantern, cradling his flail. "You see, I always have to hold myself back when the public is watching. Good work, Sergeant. Please, see that our guests are made comfortable… until I call for the girl."

Feltar snapped the whip. "In a few hours… I should be done dealing with the *other* naughty little thieves we caught today!"

***

Soot and I were on the cold floor of a cell, tied up back to back.

A thick goose egg was throbbing at the back of my head. While they were searching us, the sergeant had decided to give me a crack across the skull with the butt of his crossbow, to remind me not to try anything.

I must have drifted off for a few hours, only to wake up to find myself still bound in ropes.

Soot peeked over her shoulder to grin at me. "Well, at least we got in, right?"

"If I had known *this* was your plan, I'd have gone with charging the front gates headlong and punching my way through the watchmen."

I felt Soot shrug her shoulders behind me. "Hey, I've been here before, you know? I can wriggle my way out of this."

"I thought you were supposed to be the kind of thief that doesn't get caught?"

"Look, at least I've never been caught long enough to get punished. I always escape, that's what I do!"

The short, fat guard guffawed. He was watching our cell intently. "You escaped, once. Only cuz' you got lucky."

There was the sound of both a sharp snap and a heavy thud, all at once, coming from the dark hallway behind him. We heard a shrill scream, followed by the muffled but unmistakable sound of a woman's voice, crying desperately.

Then, the sounds of a whipping started, long, unrelenting.

*Crack. Crack. Crack.*

The woman's voice grew in intensity with each crack, before it gained a horrible new quality. Now, the grown woman's voice sounded no different than bratty little May, whenever she was taking a trip across Mom or Dad's lap for a bare bottom spanking. Whiny. Sniveling. Sorrowful.

I listened intently, trying to see if I could recognize the woman's voice, praying it wasn't Merta. But I couldn't tell either way. "That guy is sick."

Soot sniffed, then whispered. "Captain Feltar? Obviously. But it's weird that he's here. I always see him patrolling the marketplace. He's infamous for spanking any girl he can catch, even if you're just breaking one of the little local rules. But all these floggings? That's new. Ceris used to pride itself on trial by jury, but ever since the summer harvest started, Feltar's been personally whipping every minor criminal caught in Ceris… the women, at least. You ask me, I think he gets some perverted pleasure out of hurting them."

I felt a pang of guilt. I had spanked Merta, and I had rather enjoyed it.

The fat sergeant harrumphed. "And what's wrong with watching a criminal get what's coming to her?"

Soot hummed, then corrected herself. "Hmm, I suppose *I do* enjoy watching a few stupid thieves get their just desserts. Nothing wrong with spankings, provided they don't involve me. But your captain's clearly a creep. Just listen to that poor woman!"

Finally, the guard took his eyes off of us, glancing at the door behind him. "That woman stole from her master. You ask me, she deserves every single drop of suffering she gets."

Soot sighed. "Yes. And just imagine how badly her poor buttocks must be suffering at this very moment. I'm sure it's quite a sight. Sure wish I could see it."

The sergeant wiped a bead of sweat off his brow, his eyes on the door behind him.

The sounds of the woman's crying changed again, from childish pleading to guttural, incoherent, broken screams. Then, her voice cracked, and grew hoarse… grew frail. But the sound of the whipping didn't stop.

The sergeant licked his lips, then stood. “Should be your turn next, thief… Better check to make sure they’re ready for you.”

Then he stood and hustled down the hallway.

As the sergeant disappeared, Soot sighed with relief. “Finally. Hey, farmboy, do me a favor, and relax. You’ve been stiff as a board since they caught us.”

I forced myself to take a breath. “How can I relax when I know what they’re about to do to–”

The moment I exhaled, I felt the rope go slack, and my hands were free. “Huh? What did you do?”

“Old escape artist trick. You tense your muscles when you’re tied up. Then, when you relax, the rope goes slack. What, you don’t know that one? I thought that was what you were up to from the start!”

“But the sergeant must have tied that knot three times!”

Soot held up the other end of the rope. “Yeah. Cuz the sargeant’s an idiot. Didn’t even use a hobble knot. Anyway, once you have some slack to work with, you just keep working at the restraints until you can slip out a hand. Even works to get out of old metal shackles, if you don’t mind losing some skin on your wrists and ankles.”

Soot stood, and pulled something out of her hair: two black pins.

As she knelt before the cell door, her pony tail fell into a tumble of lanky, shoulder length black locks across her face. She puffed her bangs out of her eyes, and slid the pins into the lock. “Sargeant Stupid could be back any second now. I’ll need you to be the big strong man, and get rid of him for me.”

I felt my throat go dry. “What, you mean… kill him?”

“If you can.”

“But I’ve never killed a man!”

“First time for everything.”

The outer door creaked open, and the sergeant reappeared, giggling. I froze. Soot fixed her eyes on him, but kept fiddling with the lock, gliding the pins further in. The sergeant closed the door behind him, then turned to face us, wiping a trickle of blood from his nose with his thumb. He stared at Soot for a full three seconds, before doing a double take, and stumbling forward. “Hey! What are you doing, you stupid bi–”

Soot thrust the iron cell door open. The iron bar slammed against the sergeant's nose, and as he staggered back, snarling, I tackled him. He fell backwards, his skull bouncing with a hollow thud against the stone floor. He gurgled once, spitting up foam, then started twitching.

As I rose to my knees, the sergeant convulsed, then lay still.

I choked at the sight. "I… Did I kill him?"

Soot strolled out of the prison cell, fiddling with the black pin. "Not quite. Want to borrow my pin to finish the job?"

"I'm not going to kill this man! That's murder!"

"He was gonna' kill you, probably."

"I won't do it! It's… it's wrong!"

Soot knelt and aimed the needle at the man's throat. "You probably killed him with that tackle, whether you meant to or not. Here, let me just–"

I grabbed Soot's wrist. "No! He's down! You don't hit a man once he's down!"

Soot sighed. "Oh, geez. Playground rules. What did you think we were going to do if we ran into the watchmen while busting Merta out of here? Challenge them to a debate?"

I swallowed. When I was a boy, I'd read adventure books where the hero always knocked his enemies out with either the flat of his sword's blade or the pommel of its hilt. Even as a boy, I'd wondered why the hero didn't just kill the guard, even when I felt glad he didn't. "I didn't… I just assumed that…"

Then, I noticed a silence. The endless whipping had finally paused.

I forced myself to stand, lifting Soot up and away from the sergeant's prone body. "Let's just find Merta and get out of here."

Soot tried to pull away from my grip, but couldn't. "Sure. But I need to take care of this idiot first."

"You mean stab him in the neck while he's unconscious? That's murder!"

Soot glanced up at me. "You're serious? You think we can get out of here without killing a single guard? What if Feltar tries to kill us?"

"Not all the watchmen are like Feltar. Maybe he's forcing them to–"

“Help him torture those women? What if they want to try to kill your little girlfriend? Gonna let them have her, rather than get your hands bloody?”

Soot gasped. I didn’t understand why, until I looked down, and saw I was squeezing her wrists tight. “Look, I… I knew from the start that saving Merta meant we might have to kill someone, but… he’s down. You don’t have to kill him.”

“You’re making this way more complicated than it has to be. Look, if you don’t want to watch, you don’t have to. One little prick and—”

“Soot, if you murder this man, then I will… I’ll spank you.”

Soot’s eyes went wide for only a moment, then she glared at me. “Fine. Playground rules it is. No killing… unless I *have* to.”

I nodded shakily, then loosened my grip on Soot’s wrists. “Right… We’ll work together. We’ll–”

The moment I relaxed my hold, Soot whipped a hand free, and pointed the pin at my neck, her hand shaking. “And if you *ever* try to spank me… I will have to kill you.”

I froze as I felt the point of the needle pressing against my throat. “I don’t want to hurt you, Soot.”

I felt a thin trickle of blood drip down from where the point of the needle had broken the skin of my throat.

Then Soot pinned her hair back into a pony tail, and knelt to grab the sergeant’s keys from his belt. “Then let’s go rescue your fair lady.”

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We found everything they’d confiscated from us in the sergeant’s satchel. After we locked him in our old cell, we made our way down the dim corridor. The cells here were all empty. Maybe the watchmen didn’t like using the rooms closest to the sewers more than they could help it.

Soot fixed her hair, and pulled open a small leather purse. I had expected silver coins, but it contained only a few small flasks of clear liquid buried in white sand. I immediately recognized one of the bottles as the type the village drunk used to get plastered as quickly as possible.

Soot pulled out two of the glass vials. “At least I got these back. That idiot was so concerned about patting me down for hidden weapons, he didn’t bother to examine my tools carefully. We’d be dead meat if they had thought to check my hair. A minor advantage of being a woman thief.”

I peered at the alcohol. “Any more advantages I should know about? More old escape artist tricks?”

“None that I have time to teach you now.”

I paused as I overheard soft weeping. Glancing ahead, I saw a brown-haired girl cowering in the last cell at the end of the corridor. “Merta?”

Merta twisted to face us, wiping tears away from her eyes. Her hands were still tied together at the wrists. “Zack?”

As Merta tried to crawl toward us, I heard a clink, and saw she was chained to the wall by a shackle around her ankle.

Soot made an exaggerated curtsy. “Hi, your ladyship! Your knight in shining armor is here to rescue you!”

Then Soot pulled out a second set of pins from her toolkit. Apparently, the one in her hair was an emergency back up.

Merta sniffled, but as she looked at me, she started to back away, back into the darkest corner of the cell. “I’m so sorry, Zack. I should have listened to you. Now you’re in danger, and it’s all my fault! I’m not… I’m not a good girl… Not who you think…”

Merta’s voice drifted off, and she slumped back against the wall, her eyes vacant.

I wanted to scream, but at the last moment I remembered not to. There was a click, and Soot opened the door. “Go on, hero. There are some things you should do, too, you know."

I rushed to Merta and found her fast asleep. Her cheeks were shining, stained with tears. I cut the rope loose from her hands and tried to pinch Merta’s shoulder gently to wake her up. When that didn’t work, I tried again, harder. “She won’t wake up!”

“Then carry her. We have to get out."

I scooped up Merta’s limp body, holding her close to my chest. "What about that other girl?"

"What girl?"

"The girl we heard crying."

Soot opened her mouth to say something, but then her face hardened. "You know what? Fine. Let’s save her, too. Someone should spoil Feltar's fun."

Only then did I notice the eerie silence in the corridor. Soot approached the door and crouched before it. “Solid piece of work. Can barely make out a sound from behind it. Feltar must have left the door open, so we could all hear how much fun he was having.”

“Do you think he’s in there now?”

“Probably. Looks like I’ll have to magic you up another miracle. This must be your lucky day. Better set the lady down. This could get ugly fast.”

Soot picked the lock, and carefully opened the door by a crack to reveal a small, candlelit room. A few arrowslit windows in the ceiling cast an eerie, blue slit of light onto a single, long bench resting in the center of the room. There was a nude woman tied to it, lying on her stomach, neatly framed by the small gap between the door and the frame.

Her bottom was covered with crisscrossing marks and weals. She was unconscious, her face hidden behind a mess of wavy, dirty blond hair.

Then, I saw the heavy leather tongs of a flail rip across the woman’s bottom with a sickening thud. It was Feltar, standing with his back facing toward us, using his favorite implement.

But that wasn't the worst thing.

The worst thing was all the other men in the room. About five of them were standing around the girl, watching her intently.

Feltar straightened himself up, and strolled around the bench. "Drat. She drifted off again. What were we up to? Sixty-five strokes?"

“I think the poor maid’s lost count. You gonna’ start the count over again, sir?”

Feltar grinned, and I caught a glimpse of his yellowed teeth. “That would be delicious. But I want to get to the thief guild brat next. Soot, the Mistress of Thieves… and I’ve been saving the witch for last.”

“But, sir, I thought you said we were to bring you the geomancer alive and unharmed, just like the Witch Queen asked.

Feltar snapped his whip. “The Witch Queen wants the geomancer girl alive and well… But a few hours of spanking shouldn’t cripple her. I imagine that old fool farmer would be happy. We’re going to let our little cucumber thief off easy, after all. Get some water to wake the maid up, and we will complete the standard punishment.”

Slowly, Soot reached for her purse, and pulled out a rag, bundling it in front of her. I blinked as I watched Soot, before I overheard the voices of other watchmen, casually discussing the torture of the strange woman.

“Aww, just the standard hundred strokes, sir?”

“Heh. Plus the thirty she took before the airhead missed her count.”

Feltar guffawed. “The previous command here was far too... lenient. They’d waste time with investigations and trials, for a thief. Then they’d drag the culprit to the town square, spank her like a little girl, then let her go! What kind of justice is that?"

Feltar landed another ugly blow across the unconscious woman’s buttocks. "If they can walk away afterwards, it was done wrong! Of course, *if* we decide to release this prisoner—after her punishment is complete, of course—she wouldn’t be able to walk at all, would she? So we’ll just give her a lift beyond the city gate and dump her there."

Quickly, Soot pulled out both of the vials of clear liquid, popping the cork off the alcohol bottle, before dumping its contents on the rag in front of her.

One of the men spoke, his voice shaky. “Captain Feltar, once this woman has fully paid her debt to society… don’t we have a duty to uphold the law, and see that she’s returned safely home?"

“We’ll be upholding the law by seeing her safely to the nearest ditch.”

“But, Captain, if we do that… she could die.”

"In that case, the world loses one criminal. Nothing more."

"But sir..."

"I was appointed your commander, man."

"Yes sir."

“Then I am giving you a command, watchman. Once this woman awakes, I order *you* to complete her punishment… starting over from the beginning, of course. I’m afraid I lost count.”

Soot stood, with a black cloth wrapped tight across her nose and mouth. In one hand, she held a dripping wet rag, tied into a tight ball. With her other hand, she lit a match, and whispered. “Zack, hold your breath.”

Feltar rounded on us, and his eyes met mine through the narrow gap in the door. “What was that? Who’s there?”

Soot lit the balled-up rag on fire, and tossed it at Feltar's face. Then she slammed the door. "Help me! Hold your effing breath and hold the door shut!"

Stupidly, I started to stammer out a question, before everything started to happen all at once. I heard Feltar scream a curse and order his men to kill us. Then I slammed my shoulder against the door, smelled something that made my head swim, and clamped my mouth shut.

Something heavy rammed against the door from the opposite side with such force, I felt the wood rippling. Feltar's voice bellowed from behind the door. "Soot? I know it's you! **KAFF** When I get my hands on you, it won't stop with your ass! I'll flay every inch—**HACK**—I'll skin you alive!"

Soot squeaked like a mouse, then pressed her hand tight against her mouth, pinching her nose.

Behind the door, the watchmen's screams of rage and obscenities melted into fits of coughing, hacking, and wheezing. There was another feeble slam at the door, followed by the sound of several bodies slapping against stone.

Soot grabbed my collar, and pulled me back from the door. After we had backed a good ten feet away, Soot ripped off her mask and gasped for air.

I finally took a breath, and felt my lungs stinging. "What was that? Magic?"

Soot took heaving breaths. "Just some booze mixed with oil of vitriol. Old alchemist trick. Better make sure it worked."

Holding the cloth back up to her nose, Soot opened the door for me. "After you, Sir White Knight of the Shining Armor. Don't forget to grab your friend, the lady."

I scooped up Merta and rushed blindly into the room. The first thing I noticed was six men rolling on the ground, exactly the way the old village drunk used to after an especially wild night of imbibing the Devil's drink. Something grabbed at my ankle, and I saw a purple-faced Feltar. His eyes were unfocused, and his words were slurred. "Ah'll… get'choo… never… make it alive!"

Without thinking, I kicked him in the face, shielding Merta as I backed away. Feltar reeled back against the wall, struggling to get back on his feet. Then Soot appeared and choke-slammed Feltar into the wall, pressing a pin against his eye. She hissed. "I don't have a knife right now, but I can put out an eye in one second, and blind you in two."

Merta stirred against my chest, and I saw she was waking up. She started to whimper.

I cradled her head.  "Merta, everything's okay now, I'm here to rescue you..."

But Merta recoiled from me, and as she twisted away, I started to lose my grip on her. “... No! Not again!”

Desperately, I half-caught Merta, setting her on her feet, and pulled her away from Feltar, trying to shield her from his sight. “Merta? It’s okay. I won’t let them take you back!”

Feltar’s eyes fixed on us, ignoring Soot’s needle as it cut across his eyeball.  "Oh, you le’ the witch outta’ her cage? You really… shouldn't dun’ that. You dunno’ wha’ she is."

Soot gasped. “Don’t move, or I’ll–”

Feltar lunged forward, screaming as the needle sank into his eye, and physically threw Soot aside.

This time, I charged Feltar, and leaned my full weight into a forward kick, slamming him back into the wall.

There was a crunch. Feltar gurgled, and slumped to the floor, gasping. Soot’s needle was dangling loosely from his bloodshot eye. “You dunno’ who she is… The geomancer…"

I felt my chest heaving, and as I tried to speak, I heard a familiar, low, dangerous voice. It was like my Dad’s voice. But it couldn’t be. It was my own voice. "All I know is that she is a human being."

And I punched him. It wasn't a solid punch, but it was enough to snap Feltar's head back against the stone wall. He slumped down, out cold.

Soot appeared at my side, dusting off the seat of her pants, and nodded with approval. "Huh. You might have some potential. Of course, this means he won't be much help in getting us out of here."

One of the guards stirred, but Soot quickly stomped him with the heel of her boot. Then she bent over to pick up Feltar’s flail. "This thing looks like it was originally meant to be a weapon of war. Won’t do us much good to threaten the guards with this. This is just for causing pain."

Cradling her head, Merta eyed the flail, then turned to stare at the unconscious girl on the bench. "I... I could have ended up like her," she whispered.

Soot shook her head. “No. You are special for some reason. Someone wants you alive, and with your buttocks still firmly attached. Perhaps you could tell us why someone called ‘The Witch Queen’ might be so interested in your well-being?”

Merta dropped to her knees. "I... could... end... like... her..."

Soot held up her hands in mock surrender. "Not right now, of course. Hmmm, this one has a dagger on him. That will come in handy..."

I started to untie the unconscious girl. “We take her, too. I don’t know what this woman stole, but nobody deserves this…”

I glared at Feltar. Soot nudged him with her foot so that he slid the rest of the way down the fall, and emptied his purse of a handful of gold and silver coins into her own. “... except maybe for him."

As I picked up the unconscious, nude woman, I immediately saw the flaw in my plan. The woman was surprisingly tall and heavy, and easily would have dwarfed me if she could stand. And even if she wasn’t, how was I supposed to carry two bodies? "Merta, could you... fly us out of here?"

Merta shivered, and twisted to look at me, a peculiar look in her eyes as she took in the sight of the strange, naked woman in my arms. "Not while we’re still underground. But if you give me something to draw with..."

Soot tossed her a piece of charred wood, black as charcoal at one end. Merta eyed it in horror. “Where did you–”

Soot jabbed a thumb at a small, stone fire pit, filled with ash and charcoal debris. "This is a torture chamber. There's always a fireplace."

Merta took a shaky breath, and started drawing on the stone wall. I recognized the same symbol for fire from before, but much bigger than before. I tensed, expecting an explosion, but nothing happened.

Merta stepped away from the drawing. "I didn't finish the last line. And even after I finish it, it will take about a minute before it explodes.”

Soot grabbed Merta’s hand. “Hold on. I say we sneak out of here.”

Merta smiled curiously. “My wanted poster is plastered at the front gate of this tower, you’re obviously a thief, and Zack is carrying a naked, bleeding woman in his arms. We’re not going to be able to tiptoe out the front door.”

“An explosion will wake up every watchman in the tower.”

“It won’t matter. Look at the window. This will take us to the courtyard below the tower. Then it’s a straight shot to the front gate. We’ll be out before they can get their boots on.”

I stood on my tiptoes to try and get a peek of the sky through the arrowslit windows in the ceiling. “I can see the first light of daybreak. If we’re blasting out, we’d better do it quick.”

Soot shook her head. “And how big is this explosion? How do we know the roof won’t cave in on us?”

Merta smiled sweetly. “We’ll take cover.”

Soot looked like she was struggling to pull Merta’s hand back from the wall. “Where? In the corridor? You realize the same roof covers this entire floor. I don’t know anything about this magic of yours, other than it can explode or turn you into a flying brick, but either way you have trouble using it.”

Merta smirked, holding her hand steady. “I know another drawing. One I’m sure you will appreciate. Let go of my hand, and I will show you.”

I wondered if I should say something, but I hesitated. After all, Soot knew more than I did about breaking out of prison. And I didn’t know a thing about geomancy until this morning. Who was I to make the decision?

Then Soot bit her lip, and let go of Merta’s hand. “You better not disappoint, mi’lady.”

Merta crossed to the opposite side of the room, and drew a perfect square, five feet high, starting from the floor. Inside this, she drew a second perfect square, dead center, with points connecting all four corners of both squares. The lines glowed softly, and in the flickering candlelight, the drawing seemed to shift and ripple.

I squinted. Then, the moment I blinked, there was a square hole cut in the wall where the drawing had been, leading into an alcove in the shape of a perfect cube.

Merta waved her charcoal stick with a flourish, looking rather pleased with herself. “Go in. You’ll be perfectly safe. I’ll be right after you, after I finish the fire drawing.”

I stood in front of Merta. “Wait, I don’t think all these guards deserve to die. Well–maybe Feltar, but not the others."

Merta glanced down at the prone bodies, her eyes wide. "Um… I’m sure they’ll be fine. The fire won’t fill the room.”

I glanced at the magically formed space in the wall. “Merta, how can you be sure this won’t incinerate the whole tower?”

“Because the way I point the drawing directs the explosion. The blast will go straight through the wall, just below the roof.”

“Then why are you having us take cover?

Merta shuffled on her feet, wearing the exact same guilty expression she’d had when she apologized for stealing our cucumber. “I mean… there might still be a few falling rocks, but…”

Soot carefully set a toe inside the new, empty space in the wall. “Makes sense to me. My vote’s for blowing the roof sky high.”

Merta’s eyes were watery. “Please, Zack. I need you to trust me. I know I don’t deserve your trust, but I won’t let you down.”

I saw the light of dawn creeping into the room from behind me. I thought of Merta crashing through the streets in her flying geometry drawing. We were running out of time, and I had to make a decision. “Do it, Merta. We’re all getting out of here, now.”

Merta nodded, and ran around me. It all happened in a few seconds. She drew the final line to complete the tetrahedron, and ran toward our alcove. The moment she entered, the passage blinked out of existence behind her, leaving us in complete darkness.

Just as I was becoming acutely aware that I was trapped in a tight space with the bodies of three pretty girls pressing against me, we heard a terrific explosion. Merta counted to five under her breath, and thrust her arm forward. The wall disappeared again, and we saw the same torture chamber in a new light.

Most of the ceiling and outer wall was gone, revealing a sliver of the dim morning sun as it peeked over the city walls to the east. Feltar and his men were buried in a thin layer of dust, pulverized stone, dirt, and pebbles, but Merta had told the truth. The blast had been concentrated outwards.

Soot dashed forward and jumped up and out of the basement, onto the courtyard, and we followed her.

I gave Merta a boost, then handed up the naked body of the woman to both Merta and Soot. As I started to climb awkwardly up after them, I saw Soot sprinting across the courtyard, toward the outer gates.

We were just beneath the public gallows we’d seen before. The explosive force had sent chunks of stone ripping through the stockades and pillories.

From the tower behind us, we could make out the sounds of men shouting, and rushing footsteps. “We’re under attack! Close the gates! Close the gates!”

I heard the heavy, spiked iron portcullis slam down behind us, and saw a simple latticed yett gate ahead of us, across the courtyard.

I scooped up the body of the naked woman, and turned to find Merta. There she was, running ahead of me, like a graceful brown doe.

Then, Merta swooned and collapsed onto the cobblestone.

From above, a male voice cried out. “Wait! There’s someone in the courtyard! Intruders! Open the gates! Open the gates!”

Without thinking, I tossed the naked woman’s body up and over my shoulder, like I was hauling a saddle blanket. I tried to pick up Merta with my other arm, straining to stand under the weight of both women.

But as I tried to pick Merta up, Merta rose to her feet, leaning an arm around my shoulder. Merta’s eyes were hazy, but she was conscious. I didn’t know what else to do but keep walking, letting Merta lean against me for support.

Still sprinting, Soot called back at us. “Merta! Fly us out of–”

Soot took one look at the three of us, and faltered. Merta was barely able to walk, even with my help.

Soot snarled, pulling out her toolkit as we screeched to a halt. “Oh, by the Grey Mouser’s hairy whiskers! Never mind! I just gotta jimmy the lock and–”

From outside, someone in a hood ripped open the yett gates, and pulled back his hood.

It was Dad!

I felt a weight disappear from my shoulder as he scooped up the naked woman as easily as if she were a babe. “In the cart! Get going!”

I obeyed, ignoring the commotion behind us. I recognized our old cart immediately, but Dad must have put up a new rain cover.

Beneath the rain cover, Dad whipped off his hood and draped it over the naked woman. “I see you made a new friend, Zack.”

It only covered her shoulders and breasts, so I snatched up a spare saddle blanket and wrapped it around her lower waist and legs.

Soot made a grab at the reins, before Dad stepped into the box seat, and slapped her wrist. “Hands off, young lady. I’m driving.”

Soot squeaked, and rubbed the back of her wrist. “We gotta go now! They spotted us! They’re torturing women! We have to haul ass outta–”

Dad waved a hand as he lightly slapped Sandy’s flanks with the reins. “Easy, easy. Sandy’s a trusty old mare. She likes to go at her own pace. Steady, and unbothered.”

I started to argue, but then, I noticed our surroundings. It was morning. The farmers were all up and about in their carts. Donkeys, oxen, horses, sheep, goats. Of course! We’d stepped right out into morning traffic on the central road.

I glanced behind us and saw a couple watchmen struggling with the gate that led to the public gallows. “They went this way! A big lad, carrying two naked ladies!”

“No, no, it was just one naked lady, and two lads! Scrawny boy with black hair.”

Another guard emerged, wearing a full set of armor above the waist, and nothing but his boxers below the waist. “You buffoons! The explosion came from the tower! There’s men trapped in there! Get back to your stations!”

Slowly, steadily, we fell in line with the rest of the farmers. Dad casually glanced over his shoulder. “So, Zack, what’s the name of our latest farmhand?”

“This girl? I don’t even know her name. They were beating her, Dad, I couldn’t leave her!”

“You did the right thing. How’s Merta?”

I glanced down at Merta, suddenly realizing I was carrying her again. “She… she fainted again. She was fine a moment ago.”

Dad glanced back at Soot. “Just give them both space to rest on the cart. And Miss Soot… do you need me to drop you off someplace?”

“Are you kidding? I’m not showing my face in Ceris ever again after this fiasco.”

I scratched my head. “You… what to come home with us?”

Soot looked right at me, and deliberately rolled her eyes. “I told you I would help you, for a price. This is my first payment. You’re getting me out of here.”

Dad jabbed a thumb toward me. “Then you’d better wear something less conspicuous. I got a nice, new, modest little dress for May, and she’s about your size. Get dressed, Soot.”

Soot blushed. “You expect me to… change into a dress? We’re in public.”

I found a package with a little note addressed to May. Sure enough, it had a simple, sky blue dress. “Just toss it over that outlaw getup real quick. Better hurry.”

Soot glanced at the dress in horror. “But why does it have to be a dress?”

“Because, it’s what we have. Put it on, *now,* please.”

Soot flashed Dad a defiant look, before she glanced at the gate. With a groan, she pulled the dress over her head, and looked down to examine her chest in horror. “This won’t work. I won’t pass for your daughter.”

“Who said you have to be my daughter? You’re my niece, who’s coming to stay with us in the country to learn the family business.”

Soot pouted, and crossed her arms. “Ugh! Fine. Whatever you say… Uncle.”

“Thank you, dear. You look lovely, by the way. That dress really brings out the color of your eyes.”

Soot tensed her arm, like she was winding up a devastating elbow strike aimed at Dad’s ribs. Then she seemed to think better of it, and folded her hands neatly in her lap.

I forced myself to keep breathing. “Dad, if the guards bother to look in our cart, they’re going to notice we’ve got a naked, bleeding woman lying unconscious back here.”

“Don’t panic, Zack. I got a night dress for May too. Try to get the poor woman dressed in that. If they question us, let me do the talking. We just need to be convincing enough that they don’t think to search us.”

Soot stiffened. “Wait, wait—Merta—They have wanted posters of Merta. Even if we lost Feltar, his men will all know the geomancer on sight.”

“Not if they think the geomancer is still in prison. There are plenty of cute brunettes in the world.”

Soot clutched her skull, mussing her ponytail. “We’re screwed! They take one good look at us and they’ll know!”

Dad put a hand on Soot’s shoulder. “It’s a gambit. But we have to try.”

The traffic came to a bottleneck at the main gate, the same gate we’d tried to use to exit yesterday. A few young watchmen were halting each cart, glancing at the riders, and waving

them through. Sweat trickled down my forehead. Dad reached behind his bag and grabbed his purse.

I took a close look at Merta. There was nothing I could do. I had no power to help her.

Suddenly, Merta opened her eyes. Whatever that strange, indescribable fire I'd noticed in her eyes before was completely gone now. Her eyes were dull, vacant, but they focused on me. "Zack? Is that you?"

"Merta?"

"I... lost my altitude. I fell down and then there was that awful man from market place... what happened?"

"You don't remember?"

"No... But I'm sorry if I got you in trouble."

Trouble. An understatement to say the least. But I couldn't bring myself to argue with her. "We want to get out of the city. Can you do something to hide yourself? And the other girls?"

"Well, I could draw a hiding place..."

"You mean the drawing with two squares? Joined at corners?"

Merta nodded, and a sparkle of light finally returned to her hollow eyes. "Yes! How did you know? I'll draw it now!"

With a sudden burst, Merta sprang up, snatched up one of Dad's pieces of chalk, and started drawing on the floor of the cart.

I recognized the familiar drawing as it shimmered with inner light. "But we are on the cart! You'll just tunnel through the bottom!"

As she finished drawing, Merta clapped her hands. "No, it doesn't work like that. Look!"

A cubic hole appeared in the floor of the cart.

I stared at it, puzzled. The hole was deep enough to reach below the ground, but the sides and bottom looked like they were made from wood exactly like the rest of the cart. Soot twisted in her seat. "What's Merta up to? Oh, sweet! A hiding place? Lemme–"

"Halt! Excuse me, sir, but we need to inspect your cart. Some fugitive's been spotted in Ceris. Orders from the Captain, you understand. Is that–ahem–your daughter?"

Just as she was about to dive back into the cart to hide, Soot froze, her bottom poking high in midair as she bent over the back of the box seat.

Casually, Dad scooped Soot up by the armpits and sat her down next to him. “Oh, forgive my niece. She gets a bit squirrelly whenever we have to make a long cart trip. Introduce yourself dear.”

Soot sat primly. “Um, hello…sir. I’m–uh–Jet.”

Merta gasped, and rolled roughly into the magical hole. I scooped up the mystery woman, and tried to scoot towards the hole.

“... Jet?”

Dad chuckled. “Short for Juliette. She was quite the tomboy as a lass, and the name stuck.”

“Heh. I have a granddaughter like that. Likes to play sock fighting with all the boys. Let’s see here… black hair. Nope. Not the brown witch we’re looking for. Anything in the cart you need to declare?”

I was at the edge of the hole. At that precise moment, the head watchman, an older, bearded man, pulled back our rain curtain, and looked me right in the eyes.

Tensing, I looked down, and saw the hole had vanished, with Merta still inside it. The nameless woman coughed, and swooned in my lap, moaning in agony. The old watchman leaned against the back of the cart. “Heh. Almost no wares left. Had a fruitful day at the market, I take it?”

Dad casually opened his purse and counted out a few coins. “Indeed! And seeing as I’m a fruit and vegetable merchant, it’s left me…fruit-less! Here’s our toll tax. Do you need to see our admission papers?”

The older watchman waved a hand. “Ah, looks fine. You folks…” then he glanced down at the unconscious form of the strange woman in my lap. “Say, what happened to her?”

My mouth moved on its own. “My older sister. She had a little too much to drink last night.”

The old watchman guffawed, then looked closely at a tattered billboard. Instantly, I recognized the drawing from the wanted poster as Merta. “Hmm, dirty blond hair. Don’t think she’s our fugitive either. Still, better spank her sober the second you get home!”

Dad slapped his knee. “Ha! Only if she agrees she deserves it!”

“Well, you kids look tuckered out. Have a safe journey home. Hope to see you next year!”

“Maybe then you’ll give us a break on the toll tax?”

The old man waved a finger. “Ay, don’t blame me! I just work here. Maybe, send the Lord Mayor a letter about it, see if he reads it. Let ‘em through, greenhorn.”

As the cart started to move, I sighed with relief. Then, I saw the younger of the two watchmen, “Greenhorn,” and to my horror, I recognized him. He was one of the boys under Feltar’s command from yesterday. The one who’d panicked and dropped his sword. He took a long, slow look at all of us: me, Dad, Soot, and the mystery girl. Then he bowed his head. “You folks take of eachother.”

Then, “Greenhorn” lifted the wooden stake, and let us out the city gates of Ceris. We were free.

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We had a long, tense ride back home. Dad chose to take an indirect route, which turned it into a full day’s journey. But none of Feltar’s men came after us. An hour passed, with no sign of Merta. Just as I was starting to wonder if Merta might be trapped in a magical hole with no hole at the top, there was a flash of light, and the square portal reappeared at the bottom of the cart. The moment she crawled out, it vanished. Merta lay down next to me, completely exhausted, and fell asleep.

The unknown, naked woman finally stirred from her unconscious state, but she only mumbled a few broken words. “Grace… Grace…”

I thought it was some strange plea for mercy, before Soot called me an idiot and pointed out it was probably the woman’s name. We gave “Grace” some small sips of water, dressed her in a light underdress, and let her lie on her stomach to keep the jostling cart from hurting her cuts and bruises. She kept muttering in her sleep, and it didn’t take much imagination to figure out what sort of nightmares were troubling her.

In contrast, Merta was strangely silent in her sleep, almost like a dead body. I dared to press my ear to her chest, just to make sure she was still breathing.

Finally, an odd thought occurred to me. “Dad, why were you at the front gate? Weren’t we supposed to meet out at the west side?”

Dad hummed. “After I got Sandy back, I noticed they had a guard posted outside the sewer grate. Overheard a few of them bragging about how they’d caught a couple trespassing teenagers. Suppose I figured if you were smart, you’d abandon the original plan, and try to sneak past the courtyard gate. I was getting a bit worried, before I heard the explosion. You couldn’t have timed it better.”

“But we were captured and put in prison! How could you have possibly known what we’d do?”

“I didn’t know. I knew you had Soot with you, and I figured I’d better be where you’d need me to be if you tried the only plan that could possibly work.”

I tried to think through Dad’s explanation, and felt my splitting headache coming back. Now that the excitement was over, my entire body started to hurt. “Dad, I’m a criminal now.”

“No, Zack, you fought criminals.”

“But aren’t the watchmen men supposed to be like knights? Men of the law?”

“They’re supposed to be, yes. Their job is to uphold the law of Ceris. But a knight is called to a higher duty. For a true knight, the highest of all laws is to defend the innocent, at the cost of his own life. And when a man forgets that duty, he becomes a criminal. Even if he’s just following orders. Even if what he’s doing is ‘technically legal.’”

Soot kept looking over her shoulder, watching the road behind us. “Do you think they’ll try to hunt us down?”

Dad shook his head. “Hopefully they think we’re still in the city. Even if they’ve figured out we’re gone, I don’t think they have a clue where we’re going. Farmers come from all corners of the free lands for the market day in Ceris.”

But he didn’t sound very sure. I looked at Merta, who was still fast asleep. “That bounty on Merta bothers me. I didn’t know anyone could be worth a hundred gold sovereigns.”

Soot snapped her fingers. “Say, about that reward–”

I scowled at Soot. “Don’t even think it, Soot. We’re not turning Merta in.”

Soot held up her hands. “Give me some credit! I was gonna say… We learned that bounty on Merta was posted by some foreigner. The bitch queen, or whatever she calls herself.”

Dad held up a finger. “Mind your language. Mother and I don’t allow that kind of talk under our roof. And it’s ‘The Witch Queen.’”

“Yeah, sure. But the point is, that bounty’s not legal in the free cities. The watchmen shouldn’t have even been posting it, let alone trying to collect it.”

Dad drummed his fingers. “That is troubling. We’d better steer clear of the market in Ceris from now on. Next year’s going to be rough without my customers. But it’s probably for the best. The local politics in Ceris has been going to the dogs of late. Revolutionaries, strange new political

factions with all sorts of names I don't care to remember. I'm sure they'll forget all about you girls in a few months. You'll just have to keep out of trouble while you stay with us."

Soot blinked. "That's… very kind of you. But I don't want to be a burden. If you have a shed or barn I can crash in, I'll be out of your hair by tomorrow morning."

"Don't be absurd, Soot. You're my niece, remember? You're gonna need to stay at least a little while, until the heat dies down."

Soot shifted in her seat. "But… you *can't* house me. I'm a criminal!"

Dad hummed. "Say, Zack, what do you think? Should I allow Ma'dame Soot, Master of Thieves, to be our guest?

Soot glared at me, and I had a feeling she was planning to aim an elbow strike at my head if I dared to tease her. "Soot is–well, you are a thief–but I don't think you're the kind of thief who's going to slit our throats while we're all asleep."

Soot harrumphed. "Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence."

Dad looked at Soot. "Would you say she's a good person?"

I thought about the question. I remembered asking her why she would want to help me. "Well, I don't think she's a bad person."

Soot turned her face away from me, slouching in her seat.

Dad nodded. "Then that's good enough for me. Soot, you are welcome to stay in my home, for as long as you need a place to stay."

Soot fidgeted. "Well… Thank you, sir. I accept. I promise I won't impose."

It struck me that Soot actually looked like a girl for once, especially while wearing May's simple blue dress. A small, slender slip of a girl, despite the fact she was probably older than me.

I glanced down at Merta, still trapped in her dreamless, comatose state. "All right, Dad, what is a geomancer? You must know something about them."

Dad sighed. "I thought they died out after the end of the age of myth."

Soot twisted in her seat. "Well, Lady Merta's clearly not something out of a fairy story. Whatever she can do with those drawings, it's plenty real."

Dad cleared his throat. “Ahem! I never thought the stories about geomancers were fairy tales to begin with. I said they were something out of the age of myth. Back when the last of the evil dragons were still plaguing the hinterlands. During the war, some of the old veterans used to tell stories about how their grandfathers’ had grandfathers who served honorably under this or that great geomancer, back in ye olden days.”

I was fascinated. “So, you always believed they were real, Dad? The magic, and everything?”

“I was sure the geomancers had to be real, even if I wasn’t sure about all the old war stories. Apparently, they were always waging wars on one another, each trying to make himself the undisputed master of geomancy. Then, there was some great, big, war-to-end-all-wars that involved all the geomancers. That ended a few hundred years ago, and we’ve been fighting wars at the border ever since. Whatever the Geomancer War was, it took most of the cities and churches with it, along with their libraries. I hear folks call those times the dark ages, because we just don’t know much about those days.”

“So what were the geomancers supposed to be, according to the old war stories?”

“Exactly what you’d think. Powerful magicians, who all could draw diagrams that gave them mastery over the elements. Fire, earth, air, and water are usually the main ones. I’ve read people list different elements, or add a bunch of new elements to the number. But control of every element was supposed to be intrinsically connected to one of the platonic solids.”

Soot sniffed. “Sounds like you know a lot more than you’re letting on, old timer.”

“Mind your manners, missy. After the last border war ended, I taught myself to read. Heard it was a good way to pass the time between harvests. All I know about geomancy comes from a couple books I’ve read on the history of geometry. Apparently, all the old masters of geometry were mixed up in geomancy, like a sort of mathematical cult. But if there are any books about geomancy that still exist, I’ve never heard of them. Practicing any form of geomancy was outlawed after the big war. Even the regular geometrists had a rough time convincing people they weren’t all secretly plotting to throw the world back into chaos and anarchy.”

I looked at Merta, remembering how meek and harmless she seemed. "It can’t be that dangerous!"

“All knowledge is dangerous, Zack. You’ve seen Merta use some of these powers. Think how easily it would be for a bad geomancer to hurt himself, if he didn’t know what he was doing. Now imagine a bad man, who was an *excellent* geomancer, and knew exactly what he was doing. What would you get?”

I thought of the explosion we had used to escape. How Merta had accurately pointed it in the precise direction we needed. “Someone like that… could destroy a whole city.”

Dad stroked his chin. “There are a few fairy stories about geomancers. Sometimes, it’s treated like a dark power that poisons the soul. Something that brings out the worst in every foolish man who dares to use it. Or woman, as the case might be."

"But Merta is… she can’t be evil."

Dad nodded. “I know. But even if she isn’t evil, maybe that power is. I don’t have any easy answers for you, Zack. All I know is that she needs our help. For now, that’s all I need to know.”

Finally, Merta awoke. She yawned and stretched, and instantly seemed like the sweet girl I recognized from the market. “Good morning, friends. Or is it afternoon? I’ve never slept on a cart before. It was wonderful. So much nicer than sleeping inside the cube.”

I was relieved, but it also reminded me of just how strange her earlier catatonic state had seemed before. Without thinking, I patted Merta’s shoulder. “It’s evening, actually. We’re about an hour from home.”

“Where is home? Aren’t they going to think to look for you there?”

Dad shrugged. “Doubt anyone in Ceris has ever heard of our quiet little village. No one even bothers to put us on the maps. Besides, we’re well outside their jurisdiction. And we’re under the protection of the Free City of Cant.”

Merta bowed her head. "I'm really sorry.”

I looked at Merta carefully. "Yes?"

Merta gripped her arm. "For running away from you. And for not telling you things you needed to know. I knew there was someone after me, when I was on the road. I just thought if I could make it to the City of Ceris, I’d be safe there. It was stupid, really.”

“Who is after you, Merta? We can’t help you if we don’t know what’s going on.”

Merta turned to look at me. “I’m sorry, Zack, but I don’t know the answer to that question. I wish I knew… I remember… waking up in a dungeon. Someone telling me to make more of the drawings for them. But whenever I try to recall the dungeon—it’s like trying to remember the details of a dream. I'm not even sure what's true and what's not. I cannot tell you... not now."

Dad glanced at Merta. “What about before the dungeon? Family? Friends?”

Merta clutched her head. “I have… a memory. I know how to make the drawings. I know my name is Merta. I know… I must have had a mother. But the dungeon is where everything starts… it’s like the first page in a book. I suppose I must know how to read, too.”

I shook my head. “Amnesia?”

Soot giggled. “How romantic.”

Dad sighed. “If geomancy is real, and the Witch Queen is trying to master it, who knows what kind of old magic she’s managed to resurrect.”

Merta’s face darkened. “The Witch Queen? How do you know that name?”

Dad raised an eyebrow. “She’s only been raising hell at the border for the past three decades, making a name for herself as a conqueror. Some folks from across the border say she’s an old hag, who cast a spell on herself to appear forever young. Some of my officers thought it was just a title, passed down from one puppet queen to the next, to make her seem like an immortal goddess to her followers.”

Soot peered at Merta. “Does the name of the Witch Queen ring any bells?”

Merta rubbed circles across her temples. “Yes… yes, that makes sense. When I escaped, I had to cross into the freelands. She’s… named herself after the first Witch Queen.”

Soot blew a raspberry. “Pfft. Imagine calling yourself Raya the Witch Queen. Might as well change your name to ‘The Big Bad Wolf.’ What a joke.”

Dad pinched Soot gently. “Whatever her real name is, the Witch Queen is no joke. I’ll have to make a trip to Cant. Hopefully some old friends can arrange a meeting with the Lord Mayor. The Free Cities may have to raise a new army.”

Soot rubbed the spot where Dad pinched her, and rounded on Merta. “What else do you remember about the dungeon? Anything that could help us put a face to the name, your ladyship?”

Merta’s eyes narrowed. “Nothing that *you* need to know, miss thief. I don’t… I don’t want to remember more about the dungeon.”

I put a hand around Merta’s shoulder. “And you don’t have to. Whatever it was, it’s over now. You’re in the freelands now. Just… don’t run off alone again. We both could have gotten killed.”

Merta hung her head. “I’m sorry, Zack. I’m nothing but trouble.”

“Nonsense, Merta. You are *not* trouble. You’re my friend. You just got *yourself into* trouble is all. But if you stick with us, we’ll help you get back out of trouble together.”

Merta brushed aside a lock of her hair. “But why were you trying to rescue me?”

Dad smiled. "It's the Knight and the Lady all over again.”

"The Knight and the Lady?"

I looked at Merta in disbelief. "You must have heard it! It's this old song, about a princess who runs away from home, and gets a..."

I stopped myself before I started talking about my favorite part of the story: the spanking scene.

As I stammered, Dad turned in his seat, with a twinkle in his eye. "It's the traditional love ballad of Cant. There once was a knight, who fell in love with a beautiful lady, whom he was sworn to protect. However, through her own disobedience, the lady gave her guards the slip, and went exploring the cliffside caves alone. But she was captured by an evil ogre, and carried off to the Witch Queen’s castle. The knight had no choice but to pursue them alone, risking his own life to save her."

Merta held a hand to her chest. “Just like you did for me, Zack!”

"But I wasn’t the hero. Soot really did everything important..."

Soot grinned. “Yeah, I was definitely the knight in this story, but don’t sell yourself short. You made a good squire.”

Dad scratched his chin. "How does the last verse go, Zack?"

I recited it easily:

*The battle o’er, the ogre slain,*
*The castle’s fire and smoke,*
*The Knight bowed down to Lady fair*
*And this is what he spoke:*

*"My lady fair, what ‘ere may come,*
*By thy side I’ll be.*
*Thou I rescue, thou I cherish,*
*I'll give my life for thee.*

*“Let no man, beast, nor demon harm*
*Your skin as white as snow.*
*But should you start to behave wild,*
*Then o’er my lap you go!*

*“Two sides the bargain, that's the law,*
*And though you're all to me,*

*The time may come when I shall have*
*To put you cross my knee!*

*“No hurt will touch you, be it claws,*
*Nor evil spells, nor rain.*
*Yet by my hand, you must be spanked,*
*With love, to learn, through pain.”*

*He spoke those words, and then he smiled.*
*The Lady bowed her head.*
*She blushed a bit, and wiped his face*
*And this is what she said:*

*"The bargain is most just and fair,*
*Cause sometimes I go mad.*
*As much I hate to admit it,*
*I need a spanking bad.*

*“I am afraid, you ought to know.*
*I hate to raise my skirt.*
*To lie face down to think about*
*How badly it will hurt.*

*“But here and now I permit you*
*To spank me when there's need.*
*When I throw fit, when I kick dog*
*When I'm possessed by greed.*

*“I promise I will love you still,*
*With bottom red and sore."*
*And with a kiss they sealed the deal,*
*And kept it ever more.*

*When the Knight is with his Lady*
*She's as safe as she can be.*
*But if she behaves like a brat,*
*Just turn her o’er your knee!*

As I finished reciting, Dad nodded. "Exactly. And that's how it should be. Men taking risks for their women, and women taking spankings from their men."

Soot smirked. "Well, I was never one for this arrangement… I’m emancipated."

Dad looked at Soot with kindness. "There’s nothing wrong with that. This is always a matter of personal agreement. A girl over sixteen should never be spanked, unless she agrees to it. She should be old enough then to know when she deserves a spanking."

Merta looked at me. She had tears in her eyes. "That was a beautiful poem, Zack!"

"It's much longer. But this is the only part I remember."

Soot smirked. "I think I know why."

Merta wiped her eyes. "Would you promise to me, too? That you will always protect me?"

I smiled. "You would have to promise something, too, you know."

She nodded. "In that case, I promise that I will never again run away from you. I promise that I will listen to you. And..." she blushed, "I promise I will let you spank whenever you think I deserve it."

"Well," said Dad, "that's quite a nice promise, isn't it? Now it's your turn, Zack."

I knelt and took Merta's hand. These things should be done right.

"My Lady, I promise that I will always protect you. I promise that I will never make you unhappy. And... I also promise that I will give you a spanking every time you deserve it."

Quite unexpectedly, she kissed me. Suddenly I felt as light as a feather. "Why did you do that?"

She smiled. "That’s how it was in the story. ‘And with a kiss they sealed the deal.’ Now, you shall be my knight, and I shall be your lady."

Soot laughed. "Well, this is great! You poor thing, you have no idea what you just got yourself into, do you?"

"What?"

I took her chin into my hands. "I think, Merta, that she is referring to what you did today when you ran away."

"Oh." She blushed an even deeper shade of red. "I... I see. I suppose that was pretty foolish. I ran off alone, exactly like the disobedient lady… Will you spank me now, Zack?"

I looked up, and saw Soot watching us with undisguised interest. "No. We’ve all had a long, tiring day. But first thing tomorrow morning, we will buy you your own hairbrush."

"Yes, Zack."

"And we will put it to use right away. Not to brush your hair, mind you. Do you know what the hairbrush will be used for?"

Merta wiped her nose. "Sniff... yes, Zack. You will… spank me, with my very own hairbrush. Just like Emma, I've been a naughty little girl."

She shuffled her feet. "And I deserve a spanking, don't I?"

"Yes, you do. But you're not a bad girl. You are my friend, and my Lady. Don't worry about the spanking too much. We'll have it all over and done with by tomorrow morning."

She nodded, and giggled. "Thank you… my Knight."

Soot sneered, leaning over the back of her seat. "You still haven't paid your debt to me. And I think I know exactly what I want for my fee."

I sighed. "I think we will still need you. That Captain Feltar was a mad man. What's your price, Soot? We don't have much coin, but maybe–"

"Don't insult me. If I need money, I'll just steal it."

Dad patted Soot's bottom. "Not while you're staying under my roof you won't."

Soot quickly sat down. "Oh, no sir. Of course not. But I'm not really that interested in silver or gold. See, I helped you because you two seemed like an interesting pair. It's like watching a traveling theater troupe. I've just gotta see how the story ends! So, Zack, when you take Lady Merta over your knee tomorrow..."

"Yes?"

She smiled from ear to ear. "I want to see it. That's part of my payment."

Merta and I both stared at Soot.

Soot shrugged. "I told ya' before, didn't I? I love spankings, as long as they don't involve me."

I narrowed my eyes. "Maybe you could benefit from a spanking that does involve you."

Soot produced her knife with a flick of her wrist, and started twirling it between her fingers. Now, not even May's dress could hide the fact that Soot was not a sweet little girl. She was back to old, indecent self. "Not if you like having your hands where they are. Merta may be the spankable type, but I'm not."

Merta's mouth hung open. "The spankable type? What?"

"You know! Overly emotional, obsessed with guilt, glad to submit to an authority figure—not that Zack has much authority to speak of, but still—"

Dad glared at Soot. "Put that knife away, right now."

Immediately, Soot sheathed her knife. "Yes, sir."

Merta clenched her fists. "I am *not* overly emotional!" she said, with great emotional verve.

Soot held up her hands. "Hey, I'm not judging you. We're just different types. A proper spanking can do a lot of good for girls like you."

In my mind, I was wrestling with a vivid mental picture of spanking Soot's bare bottom. "And you are not... that?"

Soot crossed her arms, and turned in her seat to face away from me. "Definitely not. Sorry, farmboy."

I sighed. In all my nineteen years, I'd never had a female friend close to my age, apart from May. Now, I suddenly had two strange new girls in my life. Three if you count the one who was still unconscious, the mysterious "Grace."

I'd also never had an enemy before today, and Feltar was most definitely my new worst enemy. What if he found our trail?

But for now, I had other problems to worry about.

Tomorrow morning, I had to spank a girl who could easily blow me up.

I muttered to myself. "Every day is a new adventure."

With a lot on my mind, I felt myself starting to nod off, but the jostling of the cart kept me awake. As we pulled onto the paved road that led to home, I felt the bumps along the road start to smooth, and finally drifted off to sleep.

End of Chapter 2

Rough ideas:
By the Grey Mouser’s yellow teeth!
By the Grey Mouser’s golden baubles!
By the Grey Mouser’s main-gauche!